

Source Water Protection Practices Bulletin

Managing Storm Water Runoff to Prevent Contamination of Drinking Water

Storm water runoff is rain or snow melt that flows off the land, from streets, roof tops, and lawns. The runoff carries sediment and contaminants with it to a surface water body or infiltrates through the soil to ground water. This fact sheet focuses on the management of runoff in urban environments; other fact sheets address management measures for other specific sources, such as pesticides, animal feeding operations, and vehicle washing.

SOURCES OF STORM WATER RUNOFF

Urban and suburban areas are predominated by impervious cover including pavements on roads, sidewalks, and parking lots; rooftops of buildings and other structures; and impaired pervious surfaces (compacted soils) such as dirt parking lots, walking paths, baseball fields and suburban lawns.

During storms, rainwater flows across these impervious surfaces, mobilizing contaminants, and transporting them to water bodies. All of the activities that take place in urban and suburban areas contribute to the pollutant load of storm water runoff. Oil, gasoline, and automotive fluids drip from vehicles onto roads and parking lots. Storm water runoff from shopping malls and retail centers also contains hydrocarbons from automobiles.

Landscaping by homeowners, around businesses, and on public grounds contributes sediments, pesticides, fertilizers, and nutrients to runoff. Construction of roads and buildings is another large contributor of sediment loads to waterways. In addition, any uncovered materials such as improperly stored hazardous substances (e.g., household cleaners, pool chemicals, or lawn care products), pet and wildlife wastes, and litter can be carried in runoff to streams or ground water. Illicit discharges to storm drains (e.g., used motor oil), can also contaminate water supplies.

Storm water is also directly injected to the subsurface through Class V storm water drainage wells. These wells are used throughout the country to divert storm water runoff from roads, roofs, and paved surfaces. Direct injection is of particular concern in commercial and light industrial settings (e.g., in and around material loading areas, vehicle service areas, or parking lots).



Parking lot runoff

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO MANAGE STORM WATER RUNOFF NEAR THE SOURCES OF YOUR DRINKING WATER?

Impervious areas prohibit the natural infiltration of rainfall through the soil, which could filter some contaminants before they reach ground water. Also, impervious surfaces allow the surface runoff to move rapidly. Development reduces the amount of land available for vegetation, which can mitigate the effects of rapid runoff and filter contaminants. When the percentage of impervious cover reaches 10 to 20 percent of a watershed area, degraded water quality becomes apparent.

There are three primary concerns associated with uncontrolled runoff: (1) increased peak discharge and velocity during storm events resulting in flooding and erosion; (2) localized reduction in ground water recharge; and (3) pollutant transport.

When runoff is confined to narrow spaces, such as streets, the velocity at which water flows increases greatly with depth. This contributes to erosion in areas without vegetation cover, increased flooding in low lying areas, and sedimentation in surface water bodies. Sediment deposited in streams can increase turbidity, provide transport media for pathogenic bacteria and viruses, and decrease reservoir capacity. Sediments also smother aquatic species, leading to habitat loss and decreased biodiversity of aquatic species. The fast-running runoff is not afforded an opportunity to infiltrate into the subsurface, and ground waters are not recharged by rain events.



Erosion

EPA considers non-point source pollution, including storm water runoff, to be one of the most important sources of contamination of the nation's waters. According to a nationwide study, 77 of 127 priority pollutants tested were detected in urban runoff. Some of the principal contaminants found in storm water runoff include heavy metals, toxic chemicals, organic compounds, pesticides and herbicides, pathogens, nutrients, sediments, and salts and other de-icing compounds. Some of these substances are carcinogenic; others lead to reproductive, developmental, or other health problems that are associated with long-term exposure. Pathogens can cause illness, even from short-term exposure, that can be fatal to some people.



Urban runoff is commonly collected in storm sewers and discharged to waterways untreated, so that any contaminants carried by the storm water are discharged to surface water bodies that are used as the sources of drinking water. In addition, about 20 percent of the population in the U.S. is served by combined sewer systems (for both sanitary waste and storm water) that, during heavy storm events, allow contaminants from sanitary sewage to discharge directly to waterways untreated.

AVAILABLE PREVENTION MEASURES TO ADDRESS STORM WATER RUNOFF

A variety of management practices, including pollution prevention and treatment devices, are available to abate storm water pollution. The most effective storm water pollution prevention plans combine these measures and reflect local soil, precipitation, and land use conditions. Some of the more widely-used management measures are described below.

Please keep in mind that individual prevention measures may or may not be adequate to prevent contamination of source waters. Most likely, individual measures should be combined in an overall prevention approach that considers the nature of the potential source of contamination, the purpose, cost, operational, and maintenance requirements of the measures, the vulnerability of the source waters, the public's acceptance of the measures, and the community's desired degree of risk reduction. Pollution source control and prevention measures include public education to homeowners and business owners on good housekeeping, proper use and storage of household toxic materials, and responsible lawn care and landscaping; storm drain stenciling; hazardous materials collection; and eliminating illicit discharges. The incorporation of best management practices (BMPs) in building and site-development codes, if feasible, should be encouraged. On roadways, proper maintenance of rights-of-way, control of chemical and nutrient applications, street cleaning or sweeping, storm drain cleaning, use of alternative or reduced de-icing products, and equipment washing can reduce the pollutant content of runoff.

Without appropriate *erosion and sedimentation control (ESC) measures*, construction activities can contribute large amounts of sediment to storm water runoff. Erosion can be controlled by planting temporary fast-growing vegetation, such as grasses and wild flowers. Covering top soil with geotextiles or impervious covers will also protect it from rainfall. Good housekeeping measures for construction sites include construction entrance pads and vehicle washing to keep sediment and soil on-site. Construction should be staged to reduce soil exposure, or timed to coincide with periods of low rainfall and low erosion potential, such as in the fall, rather than during spring rains. Other measures include sediment traps and basins; sediment fences; wind erosion controls; and sediment, chemical, and nutrient control.

If available, ordinances and regulations on construction activities can require plan reviews to ensure that erosion during construction is minimized or require ESC measures during construction. Inspections of ESC measures and repair of controls where needed will maintain the working order of these controls and maximize their benefit.

Local governments can use a variety of *land use controls* to protect source water from potential contamination. For example, subdivision controls help to ensure that expected development will not compromise drinking water quality or ground water recharge. Requiring proper storm water management in new developments and redevelopments will ensure that runoff does not become excessive as areas of paved surfaces increase.

Low impact development incorporates maintaining pre-development hydrology, considering infiltration technology, and re-routing water to recharge the aquifer.

Minimizing directly connected impervious areas

(DCIAs) is important to reducing the flow and volume of runoff. Planners should direct runoff from roofs, sidewalks, and other surfaces over grassed areas to promote infiltration and filtration of pollutants prior to surface water deposition. Porous design of parking lots also provides places for storm water to infiltrate to soils.

Concrete grid pavement is typically placed on a sand or gravel base with void areas filled with pervious materials such as sand, gravel, or grass. Storm water percolates through the voids into the subsoil. Planting landscaped areas lower than the street level encourages drainage.

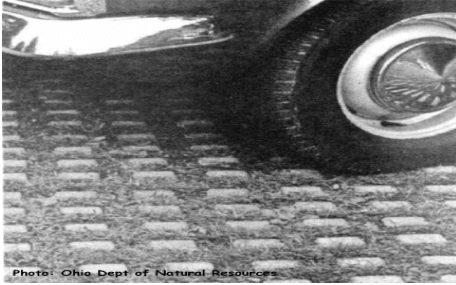


Photo: Ohio Dept. of Natural Resources

Concrete grid pavement

Structural designs are used to control runoff or temporarily store storm water on site. A number of structural devices have been developed to encourage filtration, infiltration, or settling of suspended particles. Some of the more commonly-used practices are described below.

Grassed swales are shallow, vegetated ditches that reduce the speed and volume of runoff. Soils remove contaminants by infiltration and filtration. Vegetation, or turf, prevents soil erosion, filters out sediment, and provides some nutrient uptake. Maintenance of grassed swales involves regular mowing, re-seeding, and weed control, along with inspections to check for erosion and ensure the integrity of the vegetative cover. To function properly, the inflow to the swale must be sheet flow from a filter strip or an impervious surface (i.e., not from the end of a pipe). Swales have demonstrated solids removals exceeding 80 percent. Apart from grassed swales,

grassed waterways (wide, shallow channels lined with sod) are often used as outlets for runoff from terraces.

Buffer strips are combinations of trees, shrubs, and grasses planted parallel to a stream. Buffer strips should consist of three zones—about four or five rows of trees closest to the stream, one or two rows of shrubs, and a 20 to 24 foot wide grass zone on the outer edge. They decrease the velocity of runoff, thus moderating flooding and preventing stream bank erosion. The vegetation and soils also strain and filter sediments and chemicals. Buffer strips should be maintained by controlling weeds and mowing grasses once or twice annually. In the long term, each zone should be harvested and replanted. About 10 to 20 percent removal of solids has been demonstrated in buffer zones. These buffer strips, however, do not necessarily increase infiltration.

Filter strips are areas of close-growing vegetation on gently sloped land surfaces bordering a surface water body. They work by holding soils in place, allowing some infiltration, and filtering solid particles out of the runoff from small storms. Plants with dense root systems are preferred; the ideal species and mixes of vegetation are specific to the region. The width and length of the filter strip depends on the size and grade of the slope it drains. Maintenance activities include inspections, mowing, and removal of sediment build-up. Filter strips can remove nitrogen and phosphorus, but are less effective in filtering pesticides. They are most effective when water flow is even and shallow and if grass can regrow between rains.



Storm water ponds (wet ponds) consist of a permanent pond, where solids settle during and between storms, and a zone of emergent wetland vegetation where dissolved contaminants are removed through biochemical processes. Wet ponds are usually developed as water features in a community, increasing the value of adjacent property. Other than landscape maintenance, only annual inspection of the outlets and shoreline is required. Vegetation should be harvested Storm water pond every 3 to 5 years, and sediment removed every 7 to 10 years. Wet ponds can achieve 40 to 60 percent phosphorus removal and 30 to 40 percent total nitrogen removal.



Storm water pond

Constructed wetlands are similar to wet ponds, with more emergent aquatic vegetation and a smaller open water area. Storm water wetlands are different from natural wetlands in that they are designed to treat storm water runoff, and typically have less biodiversity than natural wetlands. A wetland should have a settling pond, or forebay, if significant upstream soil erosion is anticipated. Coarse particles remain trapped in the forebay, and maintenance is performed on this smaller pool. Wetlands remove the same pollutants as wet ponds through settling of solids and biochemical processes, with about the same efficiency. Maintenance requirements for wetlands are similar to those of wet ponds.

Infiltration practices (basins and trenches) are long, narrow stone-filled excavated trenches, 3 to 12 feet deep. Runoff is stored in the basin or in voids between the stones in a trench and slowly infiltrates into the soil matrix below, where filtering removes pollutants. Infiltration devices alone do not remove contaminants, and should be combined with a pretreatment practice such as a swale or sediment basin to prevent premature clogging. Maintenance consists of inspections annually and after major rain storms and debris removal, especially in inlets and overflow channels. Infiltration devices and associated practices can achieve up to 70 to 98 percent contaminant removal.



Infiltration basin

Swirl-type concentrators are underground vaults designed to create a circular motion to encourage sedimentation and oil and grease removal. The currents rapidly separate out settleable grit and floatable matter, which are concentrated for treatment, while the cleaner, treated flow discharges to receiving waters. Swirl concentrators have demonstrated total suspended solids and BOD removal efficiencies exceeding 60 percent.

BMPs for Class V storm water drainage wells address siting, design, and operation of these wells. Siting BMPs for storm water drainage wells include minimum setbacks from surface waters, drinking water wells, or the water table. Storm water drainage wells may also be prohibited from areas of critical concern, such as source water protection areas, or from areas where the engineering properties of the soil are not ideal for their performance. Available design BMPs for storm water drainage wells include sediment removal devices (such as oil/grit separators or filter strips), oil and grease separators, and pretreatment devices such as infiltration trenches or wetlands (described above). Maintenance of these BMPs is crucial to their proper operation. Management measures related to operation include spill response, monitoring, and maintenance procedures. Source separation, or keeping runoff from industrial areas away from storm water drainage wells, involves using containment devices such as berms or curbs (see the fact sheets on vehicle washing and small quantity chemical use for more information on these devices).

EPA's National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) Permitting Program regulates storm water runoff from municipal separate storm sewer systems (MS4s) and industrial activity (including construction). The current rules establish permit requirements for more than 5,000 MS4s nationwide. NPDES storm water permits issued to MS4s require these MS4s to develop the necessary legal authority to reduce the discharge of pollutants in storm water to the maximum extent practicable and to develop and implement a storm water management program that includes:

- . Structural and source control measures to reduce pollutants from runoff from commercial and residential areas, including maintenance, monitoring, and planning activities;
- . Detection and removal of illicit discharges and improper disposal into the storm sewer;
- . Monitoring and control of storm water discharges from certain industrial activities; and
- . Construction site storm water control.