

Make a Difference

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ON WHIDBEY, STORMWATER MANAGEMENT SOLUTIONS ENCOURAGE US TO "THINK LIKE A WATERSHED"

With summer just around the corner, it looks as if "We've made it!" Another wet season is almost behind us. Even with what feels like mid-summer weather these past few weeks, we mustn't forget how wet it was. It is an opportunity come fall to be better prepared.

Although our minds are heading steadily into summer, here at Whidbey Island Conservation District, we reflect on the lessons of the wet "shoulder seasons." During these times, we have the opportunity to listen and learn from, as well as share ideas with landowners about how to address water's movement on properties. Wet yards and pastureland, flooded crawlspaces, water surfacing in areas one may not think of – sound familiar? Our goal in all this is simple – to empower landowners to find solutions, which balance both their "property hopes and dreams" while addressing and assessing the natural processes at play, so the long-term conservation of the land contributes to the long-term happiness of the landowner.

As one of our most valuable resources here on Whidbey Island, water's role is more often of benefit than it is of hindrance to us. But when water unexpectedly stands between you and your property aspirations, we agree it can be a hard pill to swallow. However, during those times, it is good to remember living on an island presents us with unique challenges and thus, unique opportunities to address those challenges – opportunities to learn and grow together in tandem with the land we so value.

Unlike our mainland neighbors, Whidbey has no major river systems. We have several lakes, a variety of wetlands, and streams, but most of us rely on water sourced from public or private wells connected to groundwater reserves influenced by the very wet weather that makes the Pacific Northwest so great. Water's value is intrinsic – how it shapes the land, how it contributes to the vitality and functions of our island's ecosystems, and how our very own lives rely on it, providing us with a prospect to approach water challenges with curiosity instead of dismissiveness, to steward instead of shun. To do this requires each of us to "think like a watershed."

What does it mean to "think like a watershed?" Perhaps you've heard a similar term before – to "think like a mountain." This was a term coined in 1949 by Aldo Leopold, author of *A Sandy County Almanac* – one of the conservation "greats" of his era. In essence, to "think like a watershed" means to cultivate our awareness to the interconnectedness our lives have with the land we own and encourages us to step up and be stewards when challenges arise. This concept, however, wasn't the first of its kind. Nearly a century prior, author John Muir exclaimed, in his 1869 *My First Summer in the Sierras* – "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe."

So how might this way of thinking be applied to your particular parcel's stormwater challenge now and in the future? When addressing water issues, it first helps to understand the history of our island's hydrology, with emphasis on your landscape in particular.

Prior to non-native settlement in this area, which has taken place predominantly over the past two hundred years, Whidbey's landscape was covered mostly in forest. In a relatively undisturbed forest ecosystem, over 45 percent of rainfall is absorbed and utilized by native vegetation, including trees and shrubs. The other 55 percent soaks into the soil and contributes to stream flows and recharge of valuable groundwater. With nearly zero "runoff" – a term coined to describe the flow of water over impermeable surfaces incapable of absorbing water – over millennia, this ecosystem had developed a refined way to effectively cycle water while maintaining its function and vigor.

Over the past two hundred years, however, forests and forest soils have been altered incrementally to accommodate population growth and its resultant development. With development comes altered hydrology – think soils compaction and addition of impervious surfaces like roofs on houses and pavement on roads. Compared to our forested ecosystem, a residential neighborhood only has 25 percent of its stormwater absorbed by vegetation, and 35 percent soaks into the soil to replenish streams and groundwater reserves.

Yet, water still falls from the sky here on Whidbey, as we have all stood witness to. With landscape alteration, then, where must the remaining 35 percent of water go? Where ever gravity dictates, as surface runoff. Stormwater sees no survey lines, nor does it favor particular property owners. Stormwater is just water responding to landscape changes, traveling across surfaces unable to absorb it, its goal to reach the nearest water body, carrying with it nutrients, detritus, and a chance for each of us as property owners to "think like a watershed" when it reaches our land.

We encourage you all on Whidbey to "stay curious" when you first encounter this unexpected visitor. When we visit properties experiencing some type of stormwater challenge, we go into full-on detective mode and work with the landowner to find answers to these questions:

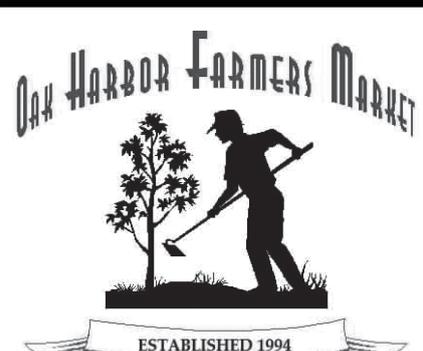
- What types of soils exist here? How might this influence the movement of water through the land?
- Where is the water entering and exiting the property? What does it do while on the property?
- What types of native vegetation exist currently on the property? Are there ways to incorporate more of this?
- How are land-use decisions made by neighbors topographically higher affecting the property?
- How have past and current land-use decisions on the property affected it and neighbors topographically lower?
- How might a landowner work together with their neighbors to address stormwater collectively?

Here on Whidbey, we have the opportunity to lead the way when it comes to addressing stormwater on our land. It doesn't take long to live here before you realize just how "small of an island" this really is. With familiarity comes increased comfort and with increased comfort comes community building. "To think like a watershed" asks us to get to know our neighbors, to recognize others' decisions affect us and our decisions affect others – and we are not alone in these endeavors, we can come together, collaborate, and generate solutions that are effective from both a landscape function, as well as a human aesthetic and financial perspective.

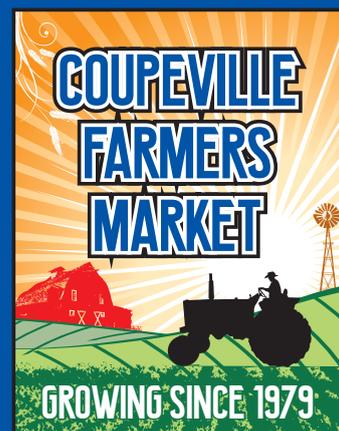
To "think more like a watershed" here at the Whidbey Island Conservation District, we are offering the opportunity for interested property owners to contact us to learn more about how they can work with staff to setup an informational community meeting in their neighborhood, which can be a place where resources and ideas are shared specific to each unique watershed and its specific challenges/opportunities. This community meeting-style assistance also encourages neighbors to come together and share their struggles and triumphs, learn from each other, and consider collectively moving forward in stormwater management solutions.

If you'd like some help to start "thinking like a watershed," please contact us at (888) 678-4922 or email matt@whidbeycd.org to learn more. We have a variety of print and digital resources available as well, found at our website www.whidbeycd.org/water-resource-management.html or by stopping by our office 1 NE 4th St. Coupeville, WA 98239 Mon-Fri 8:00 – 4:30 p.m. We look forward to assisting you.

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