

Community Involvement: A determining factor in the success of the Stormwater Phase II Program

What is Stormwater?

Polluted stormwater runoff can be detrimental to aquatic organisms and habitats. Rain or melting snow that does not soak into the ground, commonly referred to as stormwater runoff, is transported directly into our waterways by a system of pipes, culverts and ditches. As it flows over roofs, paved areas, like driveways and roads, and through lawns, stormwater runoff collects debris, chemicals, dirt, animal waste, salt, pesticides, fertilizers, oil, grease and other pollutants. This untreated water is discharged directly into the waterbodies we use for swimming, fishing and drinking water.

Sediments deposited into our lakes, rivers and streams via stormwater runoff cloud the water column, decrease sunlight penetration and interfere with the habitat of fish and plant life. Fish spawning beds are filled in, eggs are buried and food supplies are reduced. Boating and other recreational activities are also impaired due to sediment filled navigation channels and decreased water clarity.

In addition to sediment particles, nutrients and other dissolved materials transported in runoff have many significant impacts on our local waterways. Phosphorus and nitrogen can promote the overgrowth of algae, deplete oxygen in the water and can be harmful to aquatic organisms and their habitats. Bacteria and other pathogens, commonly found in fecal waste, can be detrimental to aquatic organisms. Human health is also at risk when untreated fecal waste is discharged into swimming areas. Household hazardous chemicals such as insecticides, pesticides, paints and auto fluids can poison aquatic organisms, contaminate drinking water supplies and increase water treatment costs.

The History of Stormwater Prevention in Your Community

Improving the quality of our Nation's waterways has been a top priority since the passage of the Clean Water Act. In 1990, the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) developed Phase I of the Stormwater Program to continue the success of the Clean Water Act and focus on the reduction of stormwater pollution from certain industrial activities, construction activities disturbing 5 or more acres of land and municipal separate storm sewer system (MS4) discharges from medium and large municipalities (minimum populations of 100,000). Phase II of the Stormwater Program was expanded to address non-point source pollution from construction activities disturbing one or more acres of land and small MS4s (populations less than 100,000) in urbanized areas. Regulated entities were mandated to comply with the Phase II requirements beginning in March 2003.

Under the Phase II Stormwater Program, regulated MS4s must comply with six categories of minimum control requirements. Twenty-six of the regulated MS4 communities within the Syracuse Urban Area (SUA) are working together to meet the Phase II requirements by participating in the SUA Stormwater Municipal Assistance Program, being conducted by the Central New York Regional Planning and Development

Board (CNY RPDB). The goal of this program is to maximize environmental benefits and reduce overall Phase II compliance costs for individual MS4 communities by fostering intermunicipal cooperation and program consistency across the SUA.

The SUA Stormwater Municipal Assistance Program has a strong public education component. On behalf of the regulated MS4 communities in the SUA, CNY RPDB has created various educational materials, including a program website and a brochure highlighting simple actions homeowners can take to reduce stormwater pollution from their properties. With planning assistance from the regulated municipalities in the SUA, CNY RPDB also held the “Think Spring” Public Education Workshop in March 2004. Presentation topics included how to maintain lush lawns with less effort, volunteer water quality monitoring opportunities, guidelines for landscaping to improve water quality, examples of urban best management practices, tree planting tips, ways to manage and properly dispose of household hazardous waste, composting and community stormwater management. Many local agencies and volunteer organizations participated in the workshop to answer questions, offer advice and showcase their group’s efforts towards improving water quality within Central New York.

The workshop, and many other events organized under the Phase II Stormwater Municipal Assistance Program are focused on attracting the public to become involved in improving water quality, reducing non-point source pollution and decreasing stormwater runoff. Throughout the SUA, there are many ways for residents and concerned citizens to become involved. Participating in a volunteer water quality monitoring program, such as the one organized by Project Watershed CNY, is a great way for families and friends to work together to monitor the health of waterbodies in their area. There are also opportunities for concerned citizens to participate in stream cleanups, storm drain stenciling and tree planting events, such as the programs sponsored by Cornell Cooperative Extension of Onondaga County. Another way to help your community decrease non-point source pollution is to become involved in recycling programs sponsored by your local resource recovery agency. Household hazardous waste, batteries and lawn and garden clippings are just a few of the special collection programs being offered, free of charge, at the Onondaga County Resource Recovery Agency.

Ways for You to Become Involved in the Stormwater Phase II Program

It’s also important for homeowners and residents to learn about ways that they can improve our water quality through their daily activities. Here are just a few suggestions:

- Cover piles of soil, sand or mulch to prevent them from being washed into storm drains, ditches or culverts;
- Sweep sidewalks and driveways instead of using the hose;
- Put leaves and grass clippings in compost piles, use them as mulch in a garden or mulch them into the lawn to recycle nutrients into the lawn;
- Divert roof water to lawns or gardens to allow for uptake by the soil;
- Keep automobiles and other machinery properly functioning and in good repair;
- Wash vehicles over gravel or on the grass to prevent detergents from entering the stormwater system;

- Clean up after your pet and properly dispose of pet waste – preferably by flushing it down the toilet or burying it;
- Have your septic system inspected every 3 to 5 years by a trained professional. Pump your septic tank every 3 to 5 years as needed.
- Use fertilizers, pesticides and other household chemicals sparingly and only in appropriate areas.
- Select native, drought tolerant and pest resistant grasses and plants to cover exposed soils to minimize erosion.
- Clean water based paints over soil, reuse paint thinner and take advantage of Household Hazardous Waste Collection Days.

The Clean Water Act and Phase I of the Stormwater Program drastically improved our Nation's water quality. In order for Phase II of the Stormwater Program to be equally successful citizens will need to embrace simple stormwater pollution prevention practices as part of their daily activities. By working together, the individual efforts of homeowners and concerned citizens across the SUA will significantly improve the health of our aquatic environments and protect our valuable water resources.

To learn more about the Phase II Program and the SUA Stormwater Municipal Assistance Program visit the SUA Phase II website, <http://www.cnyrpdb.org/stormwater-phase2/>.