I Live in a Watershed Vocabulary

Core concepts are under-lined

Aerial photo: Photo taken from above, either while flying overhead or from a satellite.

Algae: Simple, photosynthetic aquatic plants that lack true roots, stems, or leaves.

Algal blooms: Extensive growth of algae in a body of water, often due to increased nutrients such as nitrates and phosphates. The decomposition of the dead algae requires oxygen, often depleting available supplies.

Animal wastes: Pet, livestock, or poultry wastes.

Aquatic: Having to do with water; for example, aquatic ecosystem.

Atmosphere: The entire mass of air surrounding the Earth.

Benthic: Of, or pertaining to, the collection of organisms living on or in sea, lake, river or stream bottoms.

Best Management Practices (BMPs): structural, vegetative, or management practices designed to control, prevent, remove or reduce pollution.

Catchment: A catching or collecting of water, especially rainwater; a basin or structure used for collecting water.

Clean Water Act: Passed in 1972, it is the cornerstone of the surface water quality protection in the United States with the goal of restoring and maintaining the chemical, physical, and biological integrity of the nation’s waters in order to support “the protection and propagation of fish, shellfish, and wildlife and recreation.”

Combined Sewer System: A system of pipes that collects both stormwater and household wastes and transports them to a wastewater treatment plant. Combined sewer systems may fill to capacity during large precipitation events, resulting in untreated sewage being discharged directly to rivers or lakes.

Commercial: Having to do with businesses or places of commerce that provide a product or service, such as motels, hotels, restaurants, stores, malls, etc.

Conservation: Careful and efficient use of a natural resource.
Consumptive use: That part of water withdrawn that is evaporated, transpired by plants, incorporated into products or crops, consumed by humans or livestock, or otherwise removed from the local environment.

Contaminant: A substance of natural or human origin found in the air, water, or land that causes harm.

Culvert: A pipe that water moves through, typically providing passage for a small stream under a road.

Direct water use: Water that is used for drinking, cooking, cleaning, irrigating, etc.

Discharge: The volume of water that passes a given location within a given period of time, usually recorded in cubic feet per second.

Dissolved oxygen: The amount of oxygen in water that can be used by animals and plants.

Drainage basin: The land area that precipitation or snowmelt runs off to a particular stream, river, or lake. A drainage basin is also called a watershed. Large watersheds, like the Mississippi River basin, contain many smaller sub-watersheds.

Drainage divide: Highest point or ridge separating two watersheds.

Effluent: Water that flows from a sewage treatment plant after it has been treated.

Elevation: Height above sea level.

Erosion: The wearing away of land surfaces by running water, wind, or glaciers. Erosion occurs naturally from weather or runoff, but can be accelerated by land clearing practices, such as residential, commercial or industrial development, road-building, timber cutting, or other activities.

Eutrophication: The enrichment of water with nutrients, usually phosphorous and nitrogen, which stimulates the growth of algal blooms and rooted aquatic vegetation.

Fertilizer: A substance that promotes the growth of plants on land or in the water. Usually contains nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P), and potassium (K).

Fecal coliform: Bacteria that are found in excrement (animal wastes) or sewage contamination, occurring naturally in the digestive tract of humans and animals to aid in the digestion of food.

Flood: When water exceeds the capacity of the channel and overflows onto land next to a stream or river not normally covered by water.

Flood plain: A flat area adjacent to a stream channel that is periodically covered by flood overflows.
Gradient: Change in vertical elevation over a specific horizontal distance.

Headwaters: The source or beginning of a stream or river.

Hydrology: Study of the quantity, distribution, movement, and effects of water on the Earth’s surface, in the soil and underlying rocks, and in the atmosphere.

Impervious: Not allowing water to pass through.

Indirect water use: Human use of products that required water to grow or manufacture them.

Industrial: Having to do with the extraction of resources or the manufacture of goods, such as steel, chemicals, paper and petroleum refining.

Infiltration: Movement of water from the land surface into the soil or groundwater.

Land Use: The way humans use the land, such as industry, residential, commercial, recreation, etc.

Macro invertebrate: An organism that does not have a backbone and is large enough to be seen by the unaided eye.

Meander: A curve in a stream. Also called sinuosity.

Mouth: The site where a stream or river empties into a larger river, lake, or ocean.

Municipal: Having to do with a city.

Nitrates: A form of nitrogen that plants can take up through their roots and use for growth

Non-point source pollution: Pollution whose sources cannot be traced to a single point, but whose pollutants reach water bodies in runoff, such as pesticides and fertilizers running off lawns and farm fields, animal wastes from farms, dirt and oil on roads that runs into lakes and streams after a rainstorm, etc.

Nutrients: Substances such as nitrogen and phosphorus that promote plant growth.

Peak flow: The maximum discharge of a stream or river at a given location.

Pervious: Allowing water to pass through or seep into.

Pesticide: is a substance or mixture of substances used to kill a pest; for example an insect or unwanted plant (weed).

Point source pollution: Pollution, or pollutants, that can be traced to a single source, such as discharge from a factory, combined sewer overflow, a person dumping used motor oil into a lake, etc.

Pollutant: Any substance introduced to the environment that adversely affects the usefulness of the resource.
**Precipitation**: Any form of water, such as rain, sleet, snow or hail, which falls to the Earth’s surface.

**Public water system**: A water system that has at least five service connections, or which serves 25 or more individuals for at least 60 days per year.

**Rain garden**: An attractive landscaping feature planted with perennial native plants planted in a bowl-shaped garden that is designed to absorb stormwater runoff from adjacent impervious surfaces such as roofs and parking lots, in order to reduce the amount of untreated storm water reaching streams, rivers and lakes.

**Raw sewage**: Untreated human wastes.

**Residential**: Having to do with where people live.

**Riparian area**: Land adjacent to a stream or river that supports a greater diversity of plants and animals due to the greater availability of water and higher water table.

**River**: Flowing water of considerable volume, larger than a brook, stream or creek.

**Runoff**: Precipitation or snow melt that travels over the land surface to enter streams, rivers, lakes and storm drains.

**Sanitary sewer**: System of pipes that transports human wastes from households and commercial establishments.

**Sediment**: Earth material that is carried into a stream that is either deposited on the stream channel bottom or suspended in the water.

**Septic system**: System that includes a tank for holding household wastes that allows the settling of solids prior to distribution to a leach field for soil absorption.

**Sewer**: A system of underground pipes that collect and deliver wastewater to treatment facilities.

**Stewardship**: To take care of something.

**Storm drain**: Collects storm water runoff and transports it to a lake or river.

**Storm sewer**: A sewer that carries surface runoff and snow melt from the land, completely separate from those that carry domestic and commercial wastewater (sanitary sewers) to a wastewater treatment facility.

**Storm water**: Water runoff after a storm or precipitation event.

**Stream**: A channel with defined bed and banks that carries water during all or part of the year.

**Stream flow**: Water flowing in a natural channel, also called discharge.
**Sub-watershed:** Land area that drains runoff to a stream that is a tributary to a larger river or lake and its watershed.

**Surface water:** Water that is on Earth’s surface, such as in a stream, river, lake or reservoir.

**Tributary:** A stream or river that flows into a larger stream, river, or lake.

**Turbidity:** A measure of the clarity of water.

**Wastewater:** Water that has been used in homes, industries or businesses that is not for reuse unless treated.

**Water quality:** A term used to describe the chemical, physical, and biological characteristics of water, usually in respect to its suitability to a particular use.

**Water quality standards:** Standards established by the EPA to protect public health by limiting the level of contaminants allowed in drinking water.

**Water use:** Water that is used for a specific purpose, such as for domestic use, irrigation or industrial processing.

**Watershed:** The region draining into a river, river system or other body of water. All of the area of land that drains to a particular body of water.