

# **THE WATERSHED APPROACH**

## **SOLVING PROBLEMS AND PROTECTING VITAL RESOURCES**

### **Introduction**

The best thing about the watershed approach is that it allows flexibility and encourages creativity. People can find and implement the best action for a particular watershed. A watershed is the land area that conducts surface water to the same location.

The opposite of the watershed approach is the legislative-regulatory-judicial approach. This approach is well defined and effective but often too rigid. It is a “one size fits all” with no exceptions. It usually works well but the lack of flexibility can lead to absolute disasters.

### **Need for Watershed Approaches**

Over the past 30 years, the Clean Water Act resolved water quality problems through a system of laws, regulations and judicial enforcement. This system defined and addressed criminal activity in all its variety and successfully controlled major pollution sources. For instance, businesses and cities have made dramatic improvements in the water quality of the nation's air, lakes, rivers, and wetlands through a system of environmental permits.

However, pollution still affects the water quality of many streams and lakes. One of the main reasons is that regulations do not apply to nonpoint pollution sources. These sources are spread out over a wide geographic area such as a watershed. The pollutants from these sources are difficult to measure and nearly impossible to regulate. And when regulation has been tried, there is often a nasty political backlash.

A better approach for addressing nonpoint sources of pollution is education, incentives and voluntary action. The best method of inspiring people to act and solve pollution problems is through the watershed approach.

### **What is a Watershed Approach?**

The watershed approach focuses problem solving on a defined area using the flow of water as a way of setting the boundary. A watershed is all the land that drains water to a certain location. Watershed definition is flexible. A watershed can be a river basin like the Missouri or a dry gulch in a historic mining district.

People using the watershed approach aren't elected or appointed; they just show up and speak up. They are interested in finding good solutions for resource problems that are also acceptable to others who care about the watershed. The

flexibility of the watershed approach also applies to decision-making; participants agree on their own decision-making style usually at their first meeting.

### **Watershed Approach Values**

The watershed approach can be applied to a wide variety of issues and take many forms, but most exhibit a common set of values: partnerships, geographic focus, scientifically-based problem solving, and sharing results.

**Partnerships** -- The people most affected are included and shape key decisions. If they do not choose to be directly involved, every effort is made to keep them informed. The “welcome mat” is always out.

**Geographic Focus** -- Activities address an area that drains water to a given location. This acknowledges a dependence on a plentiful supply of clean water. Any decision should consider the effect it will have on water.

**Scientifically-based Problem Solving** – Decisions are based on scientific data and proven management techniques. This includes:

- assessing the natural resources and the communities that depend upon them;
- setting goals and objectives;
- identifying priority problems;
- selecting a cost-effect method to solve the problems;
- implementing improvements; and
- evaluating how well the improvements work.

**Sharing results**—Watershed groups share successes and challenges with each other through newsletters, statewide organizations, symposiums, and websites.

### **Benefits of a Watershed Approach**

Watershed groups are particularly good at finding solutions that consider social factors, are cost effective, and are tempered by local history. Often residents have skills and equipment that they are willing to volunteer. Scout and school groups often provide useful hands while learning about resource problems. Senior citizens can remember what has been tried in the past and how it turned out. The watershed approach can strengthen communities by drawing people together.

Federal and state agencies are drawn to watershed groups like a magnet to iron. Agencies have resources, information and talented people but they lack local input. Watershed groups can fill this need by providing local expertise and know how. In exchange, the agencies bring educational materials for distribution, grant opportunities, and organizational assistance.

Watershed groups often organize events that gather information and inform the community about issues and solutions. These include Know Your Watershed, Volunteer Water Monitoring, Watershed Festivals, Weed Whacker Rodeos and many others.

### **Getting Started with a Watershed Approach**

**Talk It Up.** The first step is finding people who are unhappy with how things are going and know in their hearts there has got to be a better way. A core group can spur each other on when things look grim and celebrate when things go well. The core then branches out to bring in as many others as possible. Not just the ones who think like them but also all the ones who challenge their beliefs.

**Set a Time and Place for Meetings.** Set a time that doesn't conflict with other important community events. Choose a central place to meet (already the watershed boundaries are taking shape.) A public place is good—curious bystanders may be recruited to join in. Talk to the local paper and radio station so they know what's happening, will provide free publicity, attend the meetings, and report on the results. Don't invite the agencies to the first meetings but perhaps a facilitator from one of the agencies would be helpful.

**List the Issues.** What is happening that must change? Why are people frustrated? Get it down on a big piece of paper that everyone can see. Now think about focusing in on the issues that most care about. This can be refined at a later meeting, but you need a rough idea of the key issues to describe the watershed.

**Set the Watershed Boundaries.** Once you know the key issues, describe the watershed that includes both the problem and solution. Try to keep the size manageable for your group. It can always be changed as issues change.

**Set the Ground Rules.** Determine who will be responsible for keeping the group together. Will everyone be worker bees or will some be officers? Will decisions be made by votes or will you just talk it through until you agree? What will the group be called?

**Celebrate.** Working through the above steps puts the group on the path to solving the problems in the watershed and community. It may not feel like much and it may have been as painful as pulling teeth, but it will lead to significant successes in the future. Therefore, pat each other on the back and celebrate the beginning. Celebrations are the social glue that holds groups together. Don't neglect them.