



# EPA Healthy Watersheds Program

*Integrating Watershed Assessment and Protection across EPA*

After decades of focusing almost exclusively on restoring impaired waters, the EPA Office of Water created the Healthy Watersheds Program (HWP) to bring more emphasis to protecting high quality waters under the Clean Water Act (CWA) objective, "...to restore and **maintain** the chemical, physical, and biological integrity of the Nation's waters." Healthy watersheds provide critical services, such as clean drinking water, productive fisheries, and outdoor recreation, that support our economies, environment and quality of life. The health of clean waters is heavily influenced by the condition of their surrounding watersheds, mainly because pollutants can wash off from the land to the water and cause substantial harm. The HWP takes a non-regulatory, collaborative approach to maintaining clean waters by supporting EPA and its partners in assessing and protecting watershed health through CWA programs. This approach is essential for addressing future threats such as emerging water quality problems, loss and fragmentation of aquatic habitat, altered water flow and availability, invasive species and climate change.

The many benefits of healthy watersheds protection are the basis for HWP collaboration with citizens, states, territories, tribes and other governmental and private partners. Our main efforts involve assessing watershed health and vulnerability, analyzing effective protection policies and approaches, and promoting protection in specific, higher quality watersheds.

## Healthy Watersheds Program Goals

- *Support states and tribes in their efforts to identify, protect and maintain healthy watersheds across the United States.*
- *Further integrate protection of healthy watersheds into EPA Clean Water Act programs.*
- *Promote the aquatic protection component in partnering with other government, non-government and private entities involved in landscape conservation.*
- *Increase awareness of the value of protecting healthy watersheds and improve understanding of the range of management actions needed to avoid adverse impacts.*

A **watershed** is an area of land where precipitation and runoff drains to one common water body, such as a river, stream or lake.

A **healthy watershed** has mostly natural land cover, especially near its waters; good water quality, quantity and flow; and habitats with diverse aquatic life. Together, these components support long-term, sustainable benefits to people and the environment.

## Primary Activity Areas

- **Integrating Healthy Watersheds into EPA's CWA Programs**  
To support protection of high quality waters via CWA programs, the HWP is initially focusing on the [CWA Section 303\(d\) program](#) for impaired waters listings/TMDLs and the [Section 319 program](#) for nonpoint source pollution control. Both programs have adopted policies encouraging states to protect unimpaired, high quality waters in recent years. This provides a programmatic basis for addressing healthy watersheds and the opportunity to promote state approaches to protection in their 303(d) program priorities, state nonpoint source management plans, and watershed-based plans. The approaches, documents, plans, data and lessons learned through these programs will provide useful examples of protection approaches and possible models for other water programs (e.g., wetlands, drinking water source protection).
- **Assisting Practitioners through Healthy Watersheds Assessment**  
Protecting healthy watersheds requires comprehensive knowledge of where they occur and to what risks they may be vulnerable. HWP supports scientifically-based targeting of protection efforts by providing EPA, state/tribal and local practitioners with a framework for assessing watershed health and vulnerability. This framework, documented in HWP's website and publications, has been implemented in twelve statewide and river basin assessment projects over the past six years. HWP is also generating preliminary healthy watersheds assessments (PHWAs) across the conterminous US,

providing a basic foundation of common information on health and vulnerability at statewide and eco-regional scales. Other activities include maintaining HWP assessment reports online; accumulating and sharing nationwide data on watershed condition; providing PHWAs and technical support to states and others; and engaging with the scientific community on watershed assessment tools and approaches for characterizing watershed health and vulnerability.

➤ **Implementing Healthy Watersheds Protection**

In addition to EPA's watershed protection authorities and funding, our federal, state, tribal, local and non-governmental partners have a wide array of approaches for protecting lands and waters. EPA is funding the [Healthy Watersheds Consortium Grant](#), which stimulates priority protection efforts across the country. By tracking these projects and communicating their accomplishments, HWP can increase awareness of effective protection techniques within and outside CWA programs. HWP will also review the implementation of protection efforts with an eye towards identifying suitable methods for measuring protection success.

➤ **Fostering External Partnerships, Coordination and Communications**

HWP provides a platform to share EPA's watershed-based perspective with key partners and programs outside EPA Office of Water. Our website ([www.epa.gov/hwp](http://www.epa.gov/hwp)) and other outreach efforts communicate with state and tribal water programs, with the broad array of agencies and organizations (e.g., DOI's Landscape Conservation Cooperatives; National Fish Habitat Partnerships) involved in watershed assessment and protection, and with the public. Our technical and non-technical dialogue spans topics such as important types of waters to protect; data and methods sharing; where potential partners are active; and building awareness of watershed protection benefits. Besides broadening awareness of protection activities, these interactions also identify potential future partnerships to be developed as capacity permits.

➤ **Growing the Community of Practice**

Building protection expertise within the watershed management community is essential to help partners move in a common direction and accomplish healthy watersheds protection over time. Practitioners working together encompass resources and abilities that far exceed EPA's capacity alone. HWP recognizes that we contribute to, and are part of, a much broader "community of practice" dedicated to protecting high quality waters. For example, in addition to funding projects, the Healthy Watersheds Consortium Grant seeks to attract, unify and build a consortium of watershed protection practitioners with greater capacity for protection in the long term. Interactions among agencies and non-governmental organizations within a consortium can improve sharing of data, strategies, and ways to overcome barriers to success. Through sustained effort, HWP and its partners may help grow effective programs, policies, assessment and protection approaches throughout the watershed management community.

