

# COMMUNITY PARTNERS FOR HEALTHY STREAMS: A POLLUTION PREVENTION STRATEGY

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**Abstract.** Community Partners for Healthy Streams (CPHS) is an outreach program under development by the Cobb County Water System (CCWS) Office of Environmental Compliance (EC). Based on materials and protocols developed by Washtenaw County, Michigan, CPHS helps local businesses learn ways to protect their watersheds. Using the Washtenaw County program as a template, CCWS edited existing education materials to make them appropriate for state and local ordinance requirements. Participants in the program agree to identify and assess potential pollution sources from their businesses and develop a site-specific Water Quality Assessment and Action Plan (WQAAP). Once completed, the WQAAP outlines a strategy for protecting local waterways. Businesses that choose to participate in the program become a Community Partner for Healthy Streams and are promoted as such by the Cobb County Water System.

## INTRODUCTION

In the last ten years, Cobb County, a fast growing Atlanta suburban community, has seen a dramatic increase in the number of commercial facilities located in the County. Each of these businesses is a potential source of polluted runoff requiring compliance education. The CPHS program offers an alternative to the often adversarial relationship between regulator and customer. In many jurisdictions, it is common for correspondence to be limited to notices of violation while well-managed businesses that follow code requirements are often overlooked. CPHS provides businesses with an opportunity to receive positive recognition from the County. In 2005, CCWS started seeking volunteers within the business community to participate in the program. Teams are established among the EC staff to facilitate completion of the WQAAP and work with facility personnel on any issues that arise during the process.

Watershed protection through cooperation is achieved with businesses and government working together and sharing responsibility for maintaining a healthy

environment. CPHS participants will develop an increased understanding of local water quality issues, pollution prevention strategies, and an increased sense of responsibility. Through completion of the CPHS program, participants will view the community as a natural resource, to be protected and managed.

## PROGRAM OVERVIEW

CPHS is a cooperative education effort. Local businesses are invited to voluntarily participate in the program to help CCWS protect local streams. Participants are given education materials outlining pollution sources and specific prevention practices that can be implemented to reduce or eliminate the problems. These materials were originally created through a U.S. EPA Clean Water Act Grant by the Washtenaw County Michigan Drain Commissioner's Office. CCWS discovered the program while researching storm water education programs and contacted Washtenaw County for more information. In addition to providing copies of their education materials, the Washtenaw County Program Manager, Michelle Bononi, shared the contact information for the illustrator who designed the materials, David Zinn. CCWS has been working with David to revise these existing materials including revisions for Georgia and Cobb County code requirements and changing the Getting Help section listing local contact organizations and numbers. With these minor changes, CCWS has been able to revise the Washtenaw County program materials to implement the Community Partners for Healthy Streams. CPHS materials consist of a series of eight booklets that lead participants through the development of a WQAAP and are provided at no charge to participants. Once the business has been assessed internally, a CCWS staff member visits the facility to assist participants with implementing the WQAAP.

The philosophy of the Cobb County Water System is to achieve compliance through education, with a minimum of administrative action. With the CPHS program, EC staff is given the opportunity to work closely with businesses in a non-regulatory role to further protect local water quality. Cobb County's EC staff work hard to

maintain positive relationships with permittees and to promote EC as a resource for local businesses. In working with local businesses to ensure standards are being achieved, compliance officers are in a unique position to know which establishments are suited to participate in the program. Although the program is open to all commercial facilities, participants must meet compliance standards to be publicly promoted as a community partner. CPHS takes participants beyond compliance. When the impact of unregulated practices is revealed, participants develop a sense of stewardship and understanding of personal responsibility for local ecology.

## PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The impact of non-point source pollution on water quality remains a problem in Cobb County. CPHS further educates the community about pollution prevention by focusing on these specific sources:

- Housekeeping Practices
- Maintaining Engineered Stormwater Controls
- Maintaining Equipment and Vehicles
- Maintaining Buildings and Pavement
- Maintaining Landscapes
- Site Design and Construction
- Managing Wastes
- Education

The above topics are organized into a handbook of fact sheets. Each fact sheet provides a concise overview of the potential pollutant and the accepted best management practices for the specific topic. The participant reviews the materials in the handbook and assesses his or her facility by completing a checklist. The checklist leads the participant through a series of questions relating to the handbook contents. For example, in the Housekeeping handbook, after reading about preventing and cleaning up spills, the checklist asks if employees are regularly trained in spill response. If staff isn't currently trained in spill response, one of the actions in the WQAAP becomes to implement a spill response-training program for staff. The eight checklist responses are compiled to form the WQAAP.

Some additional activities that CPHS facilities are required to implement as part of the WQAAP, if not already doing so, include stenciling storm drains, recycling, installing rain gardens, and reducing lawn chemical usage. Once the participant has completed the assessment and the County has approved the WQAAP, the business is recognized as a Community Partner that proactively protects Cobb County streams.

CPHS is an opportunity to further promote cooperation with commercial industry and increase awareness of

environmental issues through education. Beyond developing a water quality plan, participating facilities agree to implement specific actions to prevent pollution and further educate staff. A target date for completion of the WQAAP is determined based on the scope of improvements. Once agreed upon, the facility representative signs a commitment to complete the implementation of water quality improvements. Cobb County then agrees to publicly acknowledge the facility's water quality protection efforts. Through publications, displays, and their website, Cobb County promotes the business as a Community Partner for Healthy Streams.

## FUTURE PLANS

With the completion of the education materials for the CPHS program, recruitment of volunteer participants is the primary focus for the coming months. Several facilities currently permitted by CCWS for industrial discharge have expressed interest in the program and will be working with EC staff to complete their WQAAP's. Cobb County implemented a newsletter in the fall of 2004 that will serve to promote and recognize Community Partners. A website, [www.cobbstreams.org](http://www.cobbstreams.org) is also under development for promoting participation and volunteer recognition.

In addition, a ninth handbook of fact sheets focused on fats, oil and grease is currently under development. Two new fact sheets are planned to educate about oil water separators and grease traps. EC staff members are interested in targeting restaurants for participation once the program is well underway.

## CONCLUSIONS

CPHS is a new program that Cobb County will utilize as a tool to encourage proactive water quality improvements. The program has been under development for over one year and will be implemented in early 2005 with Cobb's industrial permitted industries. Based on early feedback from local business, CPHS promises to be an asset to Cobb's EC staff as an education tool, a community relations resource, and a method for helping to prevent further water quality degradation.

## LITERATURE CITED

Washtenaw County, 2001. Community Partners for Clean Streams, 2001: Ann Arbor, MI., Washtenaw County Drain Commissioner (program materials).