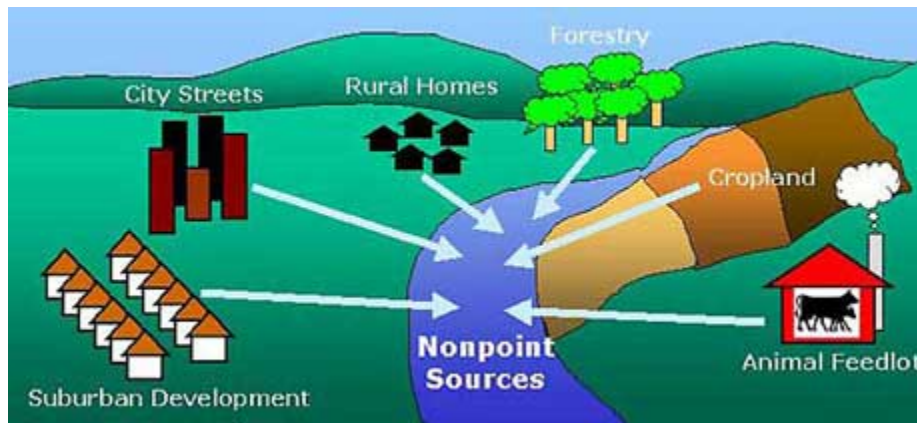


U.S. Water Pollution Basics

By Shannyn Snyder

Water scarcity is often misunderstood as meaning a lack of access to water – any water. However, when plentiful and available water sources become polluted, the issue becomes one of [quality](#) not quantity.

[Water pollution](#) is the invasion of pollutants into any body of water two different means: point and non-point sources. [Point sources](#) are those pollutants that come from a single, recognizable source, such as chemicals dumped through a drainage pipe or a specific landfill. [Non-point sources](#) are pollutants that may not be traceable to any one particular source, but a collection of pollutants that collectively cause contamination. These sources are many, from sewage from households, nutrients from agriculture, radioactive waste and oil from industry, as well as biological sediment that builds in lakes, rivers and streams.



[Source](#)

U.S. waterways were not always in their current compromised state. Streams that flowed through the natural filtration of rocks were likely suitable for pre-colonial domestic and agricultural use, with acceptable potability for drinking, cooking and bathing. As populations of immigrants boomed across the nation, however, healthy water resources became increasingly polluted from both dumping and runoff of all types of waste. These practices have led to an overall decline in the quality of America's waters as urban sprawl continues to reach out to even the most pristine areas of the nation.

In addition to man-made pollutants, violent storms and natural disasters are also a threat. These disasters are thought to be on the rise due to climate change and cause dust and other pollutants to travel through the air settle on water resources. Water main breaks and catchment overflow may also compromise filtered, potable water, forcing consumers to find other sources of *safe* water.

Although Congress established a preliminary regulation in 1948 to control pollutants in water, the [Clean Water Act of 1977](#) became the formal water pollution control program for the U.S. Overseen by the Environmental Protection Agency, this Act motivated the quality assessment of the nation's rivers, lakes and streams. According to Anne Nadakavuraren in *Our Global Environment*, in 1998 the EPA reported that 40% of America's waterways were too polluted for fishing or swimming. The EPA

has also found that national trends for pollutant indicators for all types of waterways, such as fresh water, wetlands and ocean areas, are on the rise.

Fortunately for the U.S., there has also been some increase in some environmental efforts to improve these waters. Furthermore, the EPA also oversees the safety of municipal water through the [Safe Drinking Water Act](#), ensuring that most of the nation has access to potable water. However, the trend towards water privatization of purer mountain waters for bottling companies and the overtapping of large river bodies to accommodate urban growth may mean that the nation may never get ahead of the decline, which is also exacerbated by climate. Since most pollutants are human-made, the most significant improvements in water quality will need to begin with heightened industrial regulation and changes in domestic sanitation practices.