

A photograph showing a person's leg in blue jeans and a brown boot stepping onto a muddy stream bed. The water is murky brown, and the stream bed is covered in mud, rocks, and some debris. The background is slightly blurred, focusing attention on the person's foot and the sediment.

Sediment is the largest single nonpoint source pollutant and the primary factor in the deterioration of surface water quality.

Soil In Our Streams

What is Sediment?

Nonpoint source pollutants come from a number of sources and are washed into our waterways by surface runoff. When land disturbing activities occur, soil particles are transported by surface water movement. Soil particles transported by water are often deposited in streams, lakes, and wetlands. This soil material is called sediment. Sediment is the largest single nonpoint source pollutant and the primary factor in the deterioration of surface water quality in the United States. Land disturbing activities such as road construction and maintenance, timber harvesting, mining, agriculture, residential and commercial development, all contribute to this problem.

What are the Impacts?

Water Quality and Flooding

Sedimentation of surface waters can cause stream channels to become clogged with sediment. When stream channels become clogged, the result will be an increase in bank erosion, meandering, and flooding. Sediment also reduces the storage capacity of reservoirs, destroys wetland areas, and degrades the quality of water for municipal, industrial, and recreational uses.

Aquatic Habitat

Excess sediment can change a stream from one with a clean gravel bed to one with a muddy bottom. With this change many of our native fish and animals will disappear. Gravel beds and cobble bars within a stream provide important spawning areas for many aquatic stream species, including trout and other game fish. The soil particles cover spawning areas, smothering trout eggs, aquatic insects, and oxygen producing plants. Increased turbidity levels (suspended sediment) in a stream will

