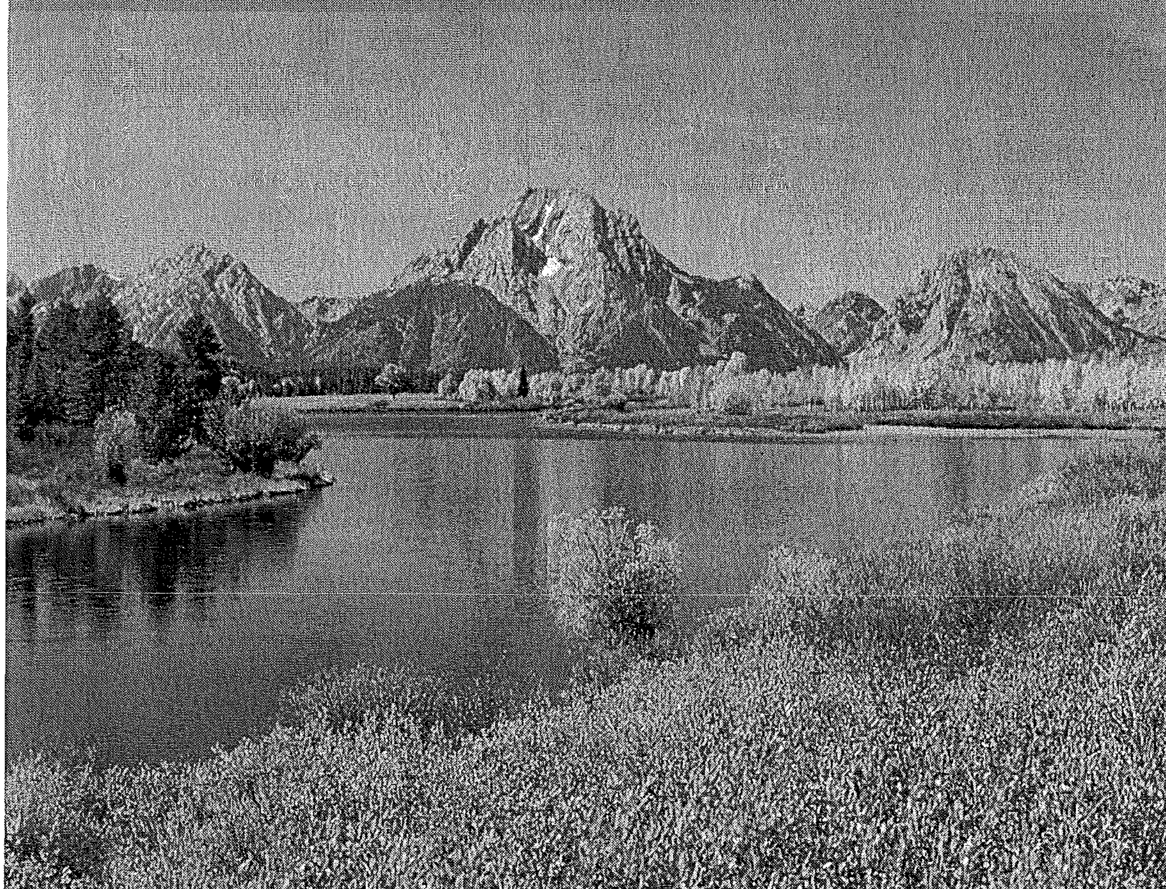

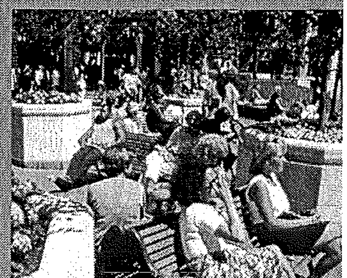

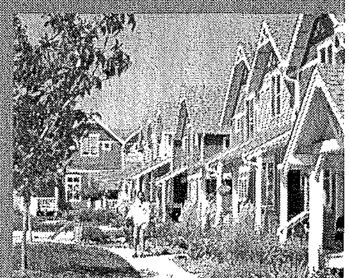

# Protecting Water Resources with Higher-Density Development

United States Environmental Protection Agency

## Acknowledgements

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To request additional copies of this report, contact EPA's National Service Center for Environmental Publications at 800-490-9198 or by email at ncepimal@one.net and ask for publication number 231-R-06-001.

To access this report online, visit <www.epa.gov/smartgrowth> or <www.smartgrowth.org>.

**Front cover photos:**

**Left:** The Snake River flows outside Jackson, Wyoming. Photo courtesy of USDA NRCS.

**Top right:** Rosslyn-Ballston Corridor, Arlington County, Virginia. Arlington County Department of Community Planning, Housing, and Development received a 2002 National Award for Smart Growth Achievement in the Overall Excellence category for its planning efforts in the Rosslyn-Ballston Corridor. Photo courtesy of Arlington County.

**Middle right:** People gather at Pioneer Square in Portland, Oregon. Photo courtesy of US EPA.

**Back cover photos:**

**Top left:** This hillside in Northern California is covered by wildflowers. This open space provides habitat to wildlife as well as serving important watershed services. Photo courtesy of USDA NRCS.

**Middle left:** A family enjoys open space in central Iowa. Photo courtesy of USDA NRCS.

**Bottom left:** A stream flows through western Maryland. Photo courtesy of USDA NRCS.

**Right:** This redevelopment site in Arlington, Virginia, which includes stores, apartments townhomes, single family homes, parking garages, and a one-acre public park, was formerly a large department store surrounded by surface parking. Photo courtesy of US EPA.

**UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY**
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20460

Dear Colleague:

We are excited to share with you the enclosed report, *Protecting Water Resources with Higher-Density Development*. For most of EPA's 35-year history, policymakers have focused on regulatory and technological approaches to reducing pollution. These efforts have met with significant success. But, the environmental challenges of the 21st century require new solutions, and our approach to environmental protection must become more sophisticated. One approach is to partner with communities to provide them with the tools and information necessary to address current environmental challenges. It is our belief that good environmental information is necessary to make sound decisions. This report strives to meet that goal by providing fresh information and perspectives.

Our regions, cities, towns, and neighborhoods are growing. Every day, new buildings or houses are proposed, planned, and built. Local governments, working with planners, citizen groups, and developers, are thinking about where and how this new development can enhance existing neighborhoods and also protect the community's natural environment. They are identifying the characteristics of development that can build vibrant neighborhoods, rich in natural and historic assets, with jobs, housing, and amenities for all types of people. They are directing growth to maintain and improve the buildings and infrastructure in which they have already invested.

In addition to enjoying the many benefits of growth, communities are also grappling with growth's challenges, including development's impact on water resources. In the face of increasing challenges from non-point source pollution, local governments are looking for, and using, policies, tools, and information that enhance existing neighborhoods and protect water resources. This report gives communities a different perspective and set of information to address the complex interactions between development and water quality.

*Protecting Water Resources with Higher-Density Development* is intended for water quality professionals, communities, local governments, and state and regional planners who are grappling with protecting or enhancing their water resources while accommodating growing populations. We hope that you find this report informative as your community strives to enjoy the many benefits of growth and development and cleaner water.

For additional free copies, please send an e-mail to ncepimal@one.net or call (800) 490-9198 and request EPA publication 231-R-06-001. If you have any questions concerning this study, please do not hesitate to contact Lynn Richards at (202) 566-2858.

Sincerely,

Ben Grumbles
Assistant Administrator
Office of Water

Brian F. Mannix
Associate Administrator
Office of Policy, Economics, and Innovation

# PROTECTING WATER RESOURCES WITH HIGHER-DENSITY DEVELOPMENT

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# Executive Summary

Growth and development expand communities' opportunities by bringing in new residents, businesses, and investments. Growth can give a community the resources to revitalize a downtown, refurbish a main street, build new schools, and develop vibrant places to live, work, shop, and play. However, with the benefits come challenges. The environmental impacts of development can make it more difficult for communities to protect their natural resources. Where and how communities accommodate growth has a profound impact on the quality of their streams, rivers, lakes, and beaches. Development that uses land efficiently and protects undisturbed natural lands allows a community to grow and still protect its water resources.

The U.S. Census Bureau projects that the U.S. population will grow by 50 million people, or approximately 18 percent, between 2000 and 2020. Many communities are asking where and how they can accommodate this growth while maintaining and improving their water resources. Some communities have interpreted water-quality research to mean that low-density development will best protect water resources. However, some water-quality experts argue that this strategy can backfire and actually harm water resources. Higher-density development, they believe, may be a better way to protect water resources. This study intends to help guide communities through this debate to better understand the impacts of high- and low-density development on water resources.

To more fully explore this issue, EPA modeled three scenarios of different densities at three scales—one-acre level, lot level, and watershed level—and at three different time series build-out examples to examine the premise that lower-density development is always better for water quality. EPA examined stormwater runoff from different development densities to determine the comparative difference between scenarios. This analysis demonstrated:

- The higher-density scenarios generate less stormwater runoff per house at all scales—one acre, lot, and watershed—and time series build-out examples;
- For the same amount of development, higher-density development produces less runoff and less impervious cover than low-density development; and
- For a given amount of growth, lower-density development impacts more of the watershed.

Taken together, these findings indicate that low-density development may not always be the preferred strategy for protecting water resources. Higher densities may better protect water quality—especially at the lot and watershed levels. To accommodate the same number of houses, denser developments consume less land than lower density developments. Consuming less land means creating less impervious cover in the watershed. EPA believes that increasing development densities is one strategy communities can use to minimize regional water quality impacts. To fully protect water resources, communities need to employ a wide range of land use strategies, based on local factors, including building a range of development densities, incorporating adequate open space, preserving critical ecological and buffer areas, and minimizing land disturbance.

# Introduction

Growth and development expand communities' opportunities by bringing in new residents, businesses, and investments. Growth can give a community the resources to revitalize a downtown, refurbish a main street, build new schools, and develop vibrant places to live, work, shop, and play. However, with the benefits come challenges. The environmental impacts of development can make it more difficult for communities to protect their natural resources. Where and how communities accommodate growth has a profound impact on the quality of their streams, rivers, lakes, and beaches. Development that uses land efficiently and protects undisturbed natural lands allows a community to grow and still protect its water resources.

The U.S. Census Bureau projects that the U.S. population will grow by 50 million people, or approximately 18 percent, between 2000 and 2020. Many communities are asking where and how they can accommodate this growth while maintaining and improving their water resources. Some communities have interpreted water-quality research to mean that low-density development will best protect water resources. However, some water-quality experts argue that this strategy can backfire and actually harm water resources. Higher-density development, they believe, may be a better way to protect water resources. This study intends to help guide communities through this debate to better understand the impacts of high- and low-density development on water resources.

Which is a better strategy to protect water quality: low- or high-density development?

Virtually every metropolitan area in the United States has expanded substantially in land area in recent decades. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Resources Inventory (NRI), between 1954 and 1997, urban land area almost quadrupled, from 18.6 million acres to about 74 million acres in the contiguous 48 states (USDA, 1997b). From 1982 to 1997, when population in the contiguous United States grew by about 15 percent, developed land increased by 25 million acres, or 34 percent. Most of this growth is taking place at the edge of developed areas, on greenfield sites, which can include forestland, meadows, pasture, and rangeland (USDA, 1997a). Indeed, in one analysis of building permits in 22 metropolitan areas between 1989 and 1998, approximately 95 percent of building permits were on greenfield sites (Farris, 2001).

Between 1954 and 1997, urban land area almost quadrupled, from 18.6 million acres to about 74 million acres in the contiguous 48 states.

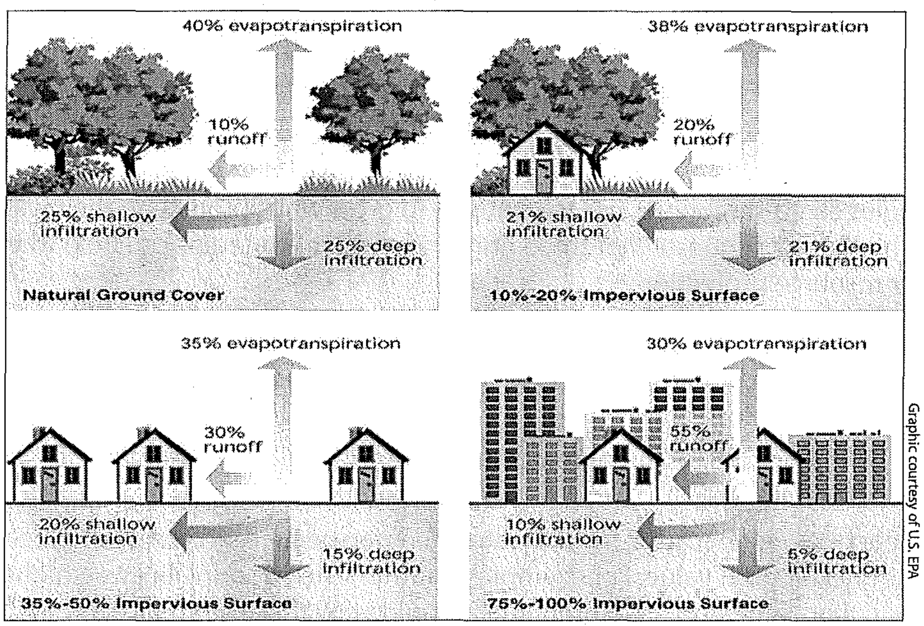
According to the American Housing Survey, 35 percent of new housing is built on lots between two and five acres, and the median lot size is just under one-half acre (Census, 2001). Local zoning may encourage building on relatively large lots, in part because local governments often believe that it helps protect their water quality. Indeed, research has revealed that more impervious cover can degrade water quality. Studies have demonstrated that at 10 percent imperviousness, a watershed is likely to become impaired and grows more so as imperviousness increases (Arnold, 1996; Schueler, 1994). This research has prompted many communities to adopt low-density zoning and site-level imperviousness limits, e.g., establishing a percentage of the site, such as 10 or 20 percent, that can be covered by impervious surfaces such as houses, garages, and driveways. These types of zoning and development ordinances are biased against higher-density development because it has more impervious cover. But do low-density approaches protect our water resources?

This study examines the assumption that low-density development is always better for water quality.[1] EPA modeled stormwater runoff from different development densities at the site level and then extrapolated and analyzed these findings at the watershed level. Modeling results were used to compare stormwater runoff associated with several variations of residential density.

## Impacts from Development on Watershed Functions

A watershed is a land area that drains to a given body of water. Precipitation that falls in the watershed will either infiltrate into the ground, evapotranspirate back into the air, or run off into streams, lakes, or coastal waters. This dynamic is described in Exhibit 1.

**EXHIBIT 1:** Watershed Services




As land cover changes, so does the amount of precipitation that absorbs into the ground, evaporates into the air, or runs off.

A watershed may be large or small. The Mississippi River, for example, drains a one-million-square-mile watershed made up of thousands of smaller watersheds, such as the drainage basins of the creeks that flow into tributaries of the Mississippi. In smaller watersheds, a few acres of land may drain into small streams, which flow into larger streams or rivers; the lands drained by these streams or rivers make up a larger watershed. These streams support

[1] Stormwater runoff was used as a proxy for overall water quality. In general, the more stormwater runoff a region experiences, the more associated pollutants, such as total nitrogen, phosphorus, and suspended solids, will enter receiving waterbodies.

diverse aquatic communities and perform the vital ecological roles of processing the carbon, sediments, and nutrients upon which downstream ecosystems depend. Healthy, functioning watersheds naturally filter pollutants and moderate water quality by slowing surface runoff and increasing the infiltration of water into soil. The result is less flooding and soil erosion, cleaner water downstream, and greater ground water reserves.

Land development directly affects watershed functions. When development occurs in previously undeveloped areas, the resulting alterations to the land can dramatically change how water is transported and stored. Residential and commercial development create impervious surfaces and compacted soils that filter less water, which increases surface runoff and decreases ground water infiltration. These changes can increase the volume and velocity of runoff, the frequency and severity of flooding, and peak storm flows.

Moreover, during construction, exposed sediments and construction materials can be washed into storm drains or directly into nearby bodies of water. After construction, development usually replaces native meadows, forested areas, and other natural landscape features with compacted lawns, pavement, and rooftops. These largely impervious surfaces generate substantial runoff. For these reasons, limiting or minimizing the amount of land disturbed and impervious cover created during development can help protect water quality.

## Critical Land Use Components for Protecting Water Quality for Both Low- and High-Density Development

What strategies can communities use to continue to grow while protecting their water quality? Watershed hydrology suggests that three primary land use strategies can help to ensure adequate water resource protection:

- Preserve large, continuous areas of absorbent open space;
- Preserve critical ecological areas, such as wetlands, floodplains, and riparian corridors; and
- Minimize overall land disturbance and impervious surface associated with development.

These approaches work because, from a watershed perspective, different land areas have different levels of ecological value. For example, a nutrient-rich floodplain has a higher ecological value than a grass meadow. Communities should view these strategies as basic steps to preserve watershed function and as the framework within which all development occurs.

### Preserving Open Space

Preserving open space is critical to maintaining water quality at the regional level. Large, continuous areas of open space reduce and slow runoff, absorb sediments, serve as flood control, and help maintain aquatic communities. To ensure well-functioning watersheds, regions should set aside sufficient amounts of undisturbed, open space to absorb, filter, and store rainwater. In most regions, this undeveloped land comprises large portions of a watershed, filtering out trash, debris, and chemical pollutants before they enter a community's water system. Open space provides other benefits, including habitat for plants and animals, recreational opportunities, forest and ranch land, places of natural beauty, and community recreation areas.

To protect these benefits, some communities are preserving undeveloped parcels or regional swaths of open space. One of the most dramatic examples is the New York City Watershed Agreement. New York City, New York State, over 70 towns, eight counties, and EPA signed the agreement to support an enhanced watershed protection program for the New York City drinking water supply. The city-funded, multi-year, $1.4-billion agreement developed a multifaceted land conservation approach, which includes the purchase of 80,000 acres within the watershed as a buffer around the city's drinking water supply. This plan allows the city to avoid the construction of filtration facilities estimated to cost six to eight billion dollars (New York City, 2002).

## Preserving Ecologically Sensitive Areas

Some types of land perform watershed functions better than others do. Preserving ecologically important land, such as wetlands, buffer zones, riparian corridors, and floodplains, is critical for regional water quality. Wetlands are natural filtration plants, slowing water flow and allowing sediments to settle and the water to clarify. Trace metals bound to clay carried in runoff also drop out and become sequestered in the soils and peat at the bed of the marsh instead of entering waterbodies, such as streams, lakes, or rivers. Preserving and maintaining wetlands are critical to maintain water quality.


Photo courtesy of USDA NRCS

Wetlands, such as this one in Butte County, California, provide critical watershed services for the region.

In addition, strips of vegetation along streams and around reservoirs are important buffers, with wooded buffers offering the greatest protection. For example, if soil conditions are right, a 20- to 30-foot-wide strip of woodland removes 90 percent of the nitrates in stormwater runoff (Trust for Public Land, 1997). These buffer zones decrease the amount of pollution entering the water system. Tree and shrub roots hold the bank in place, preventing erosion and its resulting sedimentation and turbidity. Organic matter and grasses slow the flow of runoff, giving the sediment time to settle and water time to percolate, filter through the soil, and recharge underlying ground water. Research has shown that wetlands and buffer zones, by slowing and holding water, increase ground water recharge, which directly reduces the potential for flooding (Schueler, 1994). By identifying and preserving these critical ecological areas, communities are actively protecting and enhancing their water quality.

## Minimizing Land Disturbance and Impervious Cover

Minimizing land disturbance and impervious cover is critical to maintaining watershed health. The amount of land that is converted, or "disturbed," from undeveloped uses, such as forests and meadows, to developed uses, such as lawns and playing fields, significantly affects watershed health. Research now shows that the volume of runoff from highly compacted lawns is almost as high as from paved surfaces (Schueler, 1995, 2000; USDA, 2001). This research indicates that lawns and other residential landscape features do not function, with regard to water, in the same way as nondegraded natural areas. In part, the difference arises because developing land in greenfield areas involves wholesale grading of the site and removal of topsoil, which can lead to severe erosion during construction, and soil compaction by heavy equipment. However, most communities focus not on total land disturbed, but on the amount of impervious cover created.

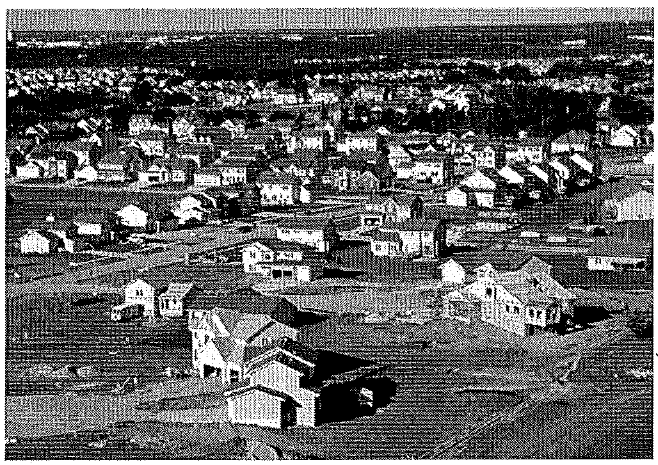


Photo courtesy of USDA NRCS

Current construction practices generally disturb the entire development site, as shown by this site in Des Moines, Iowa.

Research has revealed a strong relationship between impervious cover and water quality (Arnold, 1996; Schueler, 1994; EPA, 1997). Impervious surfaces collect and accumulate pollutants deposited from the atmosphere, leaked from vehicles, or derived from other sources. During storms, accumulated pollutants are quickly washed off and rapidly delivered to aquatic systems. Studies have demonstrated that at 10 percent imperviousness,[2] a watershed is likely to become impaired (Schueler, 1996; Caraco, 1998; Montgomery County, 2000), the stream channel becomes unstable due to increased water volumes and stream bank erosion, and water quality and stream biodiversity decrease. At 25 percent imperviousness, a watershed becomes severely impaired, the stream channel can become highly unstable, and water quality and stream biodiversity are poor[3] (Schueler, 2000). The amount of impervious cover is an important indicator of watershed health, and managing the degree to which a watershed is developed is critical to maintaining watershed function.

Although the 10 percent threshold refers to overall imperviousness within the watershed, municipalities have applied it to individual sites within the watershed, believing that lower densities better protect watershed functions. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, some localities have gone so far as to create strong incentives for, or even require, low densities—with water resource protection as an explicit goal. These communities are attempting to minimize hard

[2] The 10 percent figure is not an absolute threshold. Recent studies have indicated that in some watersheds, serious degradation may begin well below 10 percent. However, the level at which watershed degradation begins is not the focus of this study. For purposes of our analysis, EPA uses the 10 percent threshold as an indicator that water resources might be impacted.

[3] There are different levels of impairment. In general, when the term is used in EPA publications, it usually means that a waterbody is not meeting its designated water quality standard. However, the term can also imply a decline or absence of biological integrity; for example, the waterbody can no longer sustain critical indicator species, such as trout or salmon. Further, there is a wide breadth of levels of impairment, from waterbodies that are unable to support endangered species to waterbodies that cannot support any of the beneficial-use designations.

surfaces at the site level. They believe that limiting densities within particular development sites limits regional imperviousness and thus protects regional water quality. The next section examines this proposition and finds that low-density development can, in fact, harm water quality.

## Low-Density Development—Critiquing Conventional Wisdom

As discussed, studies have demonstrated that watersheds can suffer impairment at 10 percent impervious cover and that at 25 percent imperviousness, the watershed is typically considered severely impaired. Communities have often translated these findings into the notion that low-density development at the site level results in better water quality. Such conclusions often come from analysis such as: a one-acre site has one or two homes with a driveway and a road passing by the property. The remainder of the site is lawn. Assuming an average housing footprint of 2,265 square feet[4] (National Association of Home Builders, 2001), the impervious cover for this one-acre site is approximately 35 percent (Soil Conservation Service, 1986). By contrast, a higher-density scenario might have eight to 10 homes per acre and upwards of 85 percent impervious cover (Soil Conservation Service, 1986). The houses' footprints account for most of the impervious cover. Thus, low-density zoning appears to create less impervious cover, which ought to protect water quality at the site and regional levels. However, this logic overlooks several key caveats.

1. *The "pervious" surface left in low-density development often acts like impervious surface.* In general, impervious surfaces, such as a structure's footprint, driveways, and roads, have higher amounts of runoff and associated pollutants than pervious surfaces. However, most lawns, though pervious, still contribute to runoff because they are compacted. Lawns are thought to provide "open space" for infiltration of water. However, because of construction practices, the soil becomes compacted by heavy equipment and filling of depressions (Schueler, 1995, 2000). The effects of this compaction can remain for years and even increase due to mowing and the presence of a dense mat of roots. Therefore, a one- or two-acre lawn does not offer the same infiltration or other water quality functions as a one- or two-acre undisturbed forest. Minimizing impervious surfaces by limiting the number of houses but allowing larger lawns does not compensate for the loss of watershed services that the area provided before development (USDA, 2001).

Lawns still contribute to runoff because they are compacted and disturbed.

2. *Density and imperviousness are not equivalent.* Depending on the design, two houses may actually create as much imperviousness as four houses. The impervious area per home can vary widely due to road infrastructure, housing design (single story or multistory), or length and width of driveways. To illustrate, a three-story condominium building of 10 units on one acre can have less impervious surface than four single-family homes on the same acre. Furthermore, treatment of the remaining undeveloped land on that acre can

[4] The average house built in 2001 included three or more bedrooms, two and a half baths, and a two-car garage.

vary dramatically between housing types. For example, in some dispersed, low-density communities, such as Fairfax County, Virginia, some homeowners are paving their front lawns to create more parking for their cars (Rein, 2002).

3. *Low-density developments often mean more off-site impervious infrastructure.* Development in the watershed is not simply the sum of the sites within it. Rather, total impervious area in a watershed is the sum of site developments plus the impervious surface associated with infrastructure supporting those sites, such as roads and parking lots. Lower-density development can require substantially higher amounts of this infrastructure per house and per acre than denser developments. Recent research has demonstrated that on sites with two homes per acre, impervious surfaces attributed to streets, driveways, and parking lots can represent upwards of 75 percent of the total site imperviousness (Cappiella, 2001). That number decreases to 56 percent on sites with eight homes per acre. This research indicates that low densities often require more off-site transportation-related impervious infrastructure, which is generally not included when calculating impervious cover.

Water quality suffers not only from the increase in impervious surface, but also from the associated activities: construction, increased travel to and from the development, and extension of infrastructure.

   Furthermore, water quality suffers not only from the increase in impervious surface, but also from the associated activities: construction, increased travel to and from the development, extension of infrastructure, and chemical maintenance of the areas in and surrounding the development. Oil and other waste products, such as heavy metals, from motor vehicles, lawn fertilizers, and other common solvents, combined with the increased flow of runoff, contribute substantially to water pollution. As imperviousness increases, so do associated activities, thereby increasing the impact on water quality.

4. *If growth is coming to the region, limiting density on a given site does not eliminate that growth.* Density limits constrain the amount of development on a site but have little effect on the region's total growth (Pendall, 1999, 2000). The rest of the growth that was going to come to the region still comes, regardless of density limits in a particular place. Forecasting future population growth is a standard task for metropolitan planning organizations as they plan where and how to accommodate growth in their region. They project future population growth based on standard regional population modeling practices, where wage or amenity differentials, such as climate or culture (Mills, 1994)—and not zoning practices such as density limits—account for most of a metropolitan area's population gain or loss.[5] While estimates of future growth within a particular time frame are rarely precise, a region must use a fixed amount of growth to test the effects of adopting

Growth is still coming to a region, regardless of density limits in a particular place.

[5] The most widely-used such model—the REMI® Policy Insight™ model—uses an amenity variable. However, even this is implemented as an additional change in the wage rate. See Remi Model Structure. <www.remi.com/Overview/Evaluation/Structure/structure.html>. The in-house model used by the San Diego Association of Governments is an advanced example of the type used by councils of governments around the country.<www.sandag.cog.ca.us/resources/demographics_and_other_data/demographics/forecasts/index.asp>.

different growth planning strategies because it still must understand the economic, social, and environmental impacts of accommodating a growing population. Absent regional coordination and planning, covering a large part of a region with density limits will likely drive growth to other parts of the region. Depending on local conditions, water quality may be more severely impaired than if the growth had been accommodated at higher densities on fewer sites.

## Testing the Alternative: Can Compact Development Minimize Regional Water Quality Impacts?

To more fully understand the potential water quality impacts of different density levels, this section compares three hypothetical communities, each accommodating development at different densities—one house per acre, four houses per acre, and eight houses per acre.[6] To assess regional water quality impacts, EPA modeled the stormwater impacts from different development densities. In general, the more stormwater runoff generated within a region, the more associated pollutants, such as total nitrogen, phosphorus, and suspended solids, will enter receiving waterbodies. The three density levels capture some of the wide range of zoning practices in use throughout the country. All of these densities are consistent with single-family, detached housing. EPA examined the stormwater impacts from each density scenario at various scales of residential development[7]—one-acre, lot, and watershed levels—and through a 40-year time series build-out analysis.

## The Model and Data Inputs

The model used to compare the stormwater impact from the scenarios is the Smart Growth Water Assessment Tool for Estimating Runoff (SG WATER), which is a peer-reviewed sketch model that was developed specifically to compare water quantity and quality differences among different development patterns (EPA, 2002). SG WATER's methodology is based on the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) curve numbers (Soil Conservation Service, 1986), event mean concentrations, and daily rainfall data.[8] The model requires the total number of acres developed at a certain development density. If density is unknown, total percent imperviousness can be used. The model was run using overall percent imperviousness.

EPA believes that the results presented here are conservative. SG WATER uses a general and simple methodology based on curve numbers. One limitation of curve numbers is that they tend to underestimate stormwater runoff for smaller storms (less than one inch). This underestimate

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[6] Densities at one, four, and eight residential units per acre are used here for illustrative purposes only. Many communities now are zoning for one unit per two acres at the low-density end of the spectrum. Low-density residential zoning exists in places as diverse as Franklin County, Ohio, which requires no less than two acres per unit <www.co.franklin.oh.us/development/franklin_co/LDR.html#304.041>) to Cobb County, Georgia, outside of Atlanta, which requires between one and two units per acre in its low-density residential districts (<www.cobb-county.org/community/plan_bza_commission.htm>). By comparison, some communities are beginning to allow higher densities, upwards of 20 units per acre. For example, the high-density residential district in Sonoma County, California permits between 12 and 20 units per acre (<www.sonoma-county.org/prmd/Zoning/article_24.htm>), and the city of Raleigh, North Carolina, allows up to 40 units per acre in planned development districts.

[7] This example and others throughout this study compare residential units, but a similar comparison including commercial development could also be done.

[8] Daily time-step rainfall data for a 10-year period (1992-2001, inclusive) were used.

can be significant since the majority of storms are small storms. In addition, the curve numbers tend to overestimate runoff for large storms. However, curve numbers more accurately predict runoff in areas with more impervious cover.[9] For the analysis here, the runoff from the low-density site is underestimated to a larger degree than the runoff from the higher-density site because the higher-density site has more impervious cover. Simply put, because of methodology, the difference in the numbers presented here is conservative—it is likely that the comparative difference in runoff between the sites would be greater if more extensive modeling were used.

To isolate the impacts that developing at different densities makes on stormwater runoff, EPA made several simplifying assumptions in the modeling:

- EPA modeled only residential growth and not any of the corresponding commercial, retail, or industrial growth that would occur in addition to home building. Moreover, EPA assumed that all the new growth would occur in greenfields (previously undeveloped land). Infill development, brownfield redevelopment, and other types of urban development were not taken into consideration, nor were multifamily housing, apartments, or accessory dwelling units.[10]
- The modeling did not take into account any secondary or tertiary impacts, such as additional stormwater benefits, that may be realized by appropriately locating the development within the watershed. For example, siting development away from headwaters, recharge areas, or riparian corridors could better protect these sensitive areas. Denser development makes this type of protective siting easier since less land is developed. However, these impacts are not captured or calculated within the modeling.
- Whether developed at one, four, or eight houses per acre, when one acre is developed, EPA assumed the entire acre is disturbed land (e.g., no forest or meadow cover would be preserved), which is consistent with current construction practices.
- All the new growth is assumed to be single-family, detached houses.[11] Whether developed at one, four, or eight houses per acre, each home has a footprint of 2,265 square feet, roughly the current average size for new houses (National Association of Home Builders, 2001).

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[9] Most existing stormwater models incorrectly predict flows associated with small rains in urban areas. Most existing urban runoff models originated from drainage and flooding evaluation procedures that emphasized very large rains (several inches in depth). These large storms contribute only very small portions of the annual average discharges. Moderate storms, occurring several times a year, are responsible for the majority of the pollutant discharges. These frequent discharges cause mostly chronic effects, such as contaminated sediment and frequent high flow rates, and the inter-event periods are not long enough to allow the receiving water conditions to recover.

[10] Single-family, detached housing dominates many low-density residential developments. However, higher-density developments support a range of housing types, including townhouses, apartments, and other forms of multifamily housing. These housing types generally have a smaller footprint per house than 2,265 square feet. Therefore, a more realistic situation for the higher-density scenarios would either be a smaller housing footprint or an increase in the number of homes accommodated on one acre. In either case, including these different housing types in the analysis would produce less overall stormwater runoff and less per house runoff for the higher-density scenarios.

[11] It is possible that when additional land uses, such as commercial, transportation, or recreation, are included in the analysis, the low-density scenarios become relatively less dense while the higher-density scenarios become relatively more dense. In general, low-density residential development tends to be associated with low-density commercial development, characterized by large retail spaces, wide roads, large parking lots, and minimal public transportation. Higher-density residential areas are more likely to have high-density commercial options, with smaller retail spaces, mixed land uses, narrower streets, parking garages, on-street parking, and sometimes a well-developed public transportation system, which can reduce parking needs.

- The same percentage of transportation-associated infrastructure, such as roads, parking lots, driveways, and sidewalks, is allocated to each community acre, based on the curve number methodology from the NRCS. For example, each scenario has the same width of road, but because the higher-density scenario is more compact, it requires fewer miles of roads than the lower-density scenarios. So while the same percentage is applied, the amounts differ by scenario. Collector roads or arterials that serve the development are not included.
- The modeled stormwater runoff quantity for each scenario is assumed to come from one hypothetical outfall.
- The model does not take into account wastewater or drinking water infrastructure, slope, or other hydrological interactions that the more complex water modeling tools use.

## Summary of Scenarios

Example 1 examines the stormwater runoff impacts on a one-acre lot that accommodates one house (Scenario A), four houses (Scenario B), or eight houses (Scenario C). Example 2 expands the analysis to examine stormwater runoff impacts within a lot-level development that accommodates the same number of houses. Because of different development densities, this growth requires different amounts of land. Scenario A requires eight acres for eight houses, Scenario B requires two acres for eight houses, and Scenario C requires one acre for eight houses.

Examples 3, 4, and 5 explore the relationship between density and land consumption by building in a watershed at different densities. Again, different amounts of land are required to support the same amount of housing. Examples 6, 7, and 8 examine how the hypothetical community grows over a 40-year timeframe with different development densities.

The scenarios and scales of development are summarized in Exhibit 2. EPA expects to capture the differences in stormwater runoff associated with different development densities by using these three scenarios (Scenarios A, B, and C) at four different scales (one acre, lot, watershed, and build-out).

**EXHIBIT 2:** Summary of Scenarios

| Scale of Analysis | Scenario A: One house per acre | Scenario B: Four houses per acre | Scenario C: Eight houses per acre |
|---|---|---|---|
| Example 1: One acre | 1 house per acre | 4 houses per acre | 8 houses per acre |
| Example 2: Lot—Each development lot accommodates the same number of houses | 8 houses built on 8 acres | 8 houses built on 2 acres | 8 houses built on 1 acre |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Example 3: Watershed—Each 10,000-acre watershed accommodates the same number of houses | 10,000 houses built on 10,000 acres | 10,000 houses built on 2,500 acres or ¼ of the watershed | 10,000 houses built on 1,250 acres or ⅛ of the watershed |
| Example 4: Watershed—Each 10,000-acre watershed is fully built out at different densities | 10,000 houses built on 10,000 acres | 40,000 houses built on 10,000 acres | 80,000 houses built on 10,000 acres |
| Example 5: Watershed—Each scenario accommodates the same number of houses | 80,000 houses consume 8 watersheds | 80,000 houses consume 2 watersheds | 80,000 houses consume 1 watershed |
| Example 6: Hypothetical build-out in the year 2000 | 10,000 houses built on 10,000 acres | 10,000 houses built on 2,500 acres | 10,000 houses built on 1,250 acres |
| Example 7: Hypothetical build-out in the year 2020 | 20,000 houses built on 20,000 acres, or 2 watersheds | 20,000 houses built on 5,000 acres, or ½ of 1 watershed | 20,000 houses built on 2,500 acres, or ¼ of 1 watershed |
| Example 8: Hypothetical build-out in the year 2040 | 40,000 houses built on 40,000 acres, or 4 watersheds | 40,000 houses built on 10,000 acres, or 1 watershed | 40,000 houses built on 5,000 acres, or ½ of 1 watershed |

Before analyzing the impacts of these different scenarios, it is useful to clarify some underlying premises. This analysis assumes that:

1. Metropolitan regions will continue to grow. This assumption is consistent with U.S. Census Bureau projections that the U.S. population will grow by roughly 50 million people by 2020 (Census, 2000). Given this projected population growth, most communities across the country are or will be determining where and how to accommodate expected population increases in their regions.

2. Housing density affects the distribution of new growth within a given region, not the amount of growth. Individual states and regions grow at different rates depending on a variety of factors, including macroeconomic trends (e.g., the technology boom in the 1980s spurring development in the Silicon Valley region in California) and demographic shifts. Distribution and density of new development do not significantly affect these factors.

3. The model focuses on the comparative differences in stormwater runoff between scenarios, not absolute values. As discussed, using the curve number and event mean concentration approach can underestimate the total quantity of stormwater runoff for smaller storm events and in areas of lower densities. Because of this and other model simplifications discussed above, the analysis does not focus on the absolute value of stormwater runoff generated for each scenario but instead focuses on the comparative difference, or the delta, in runoff between scenarios.

## Results

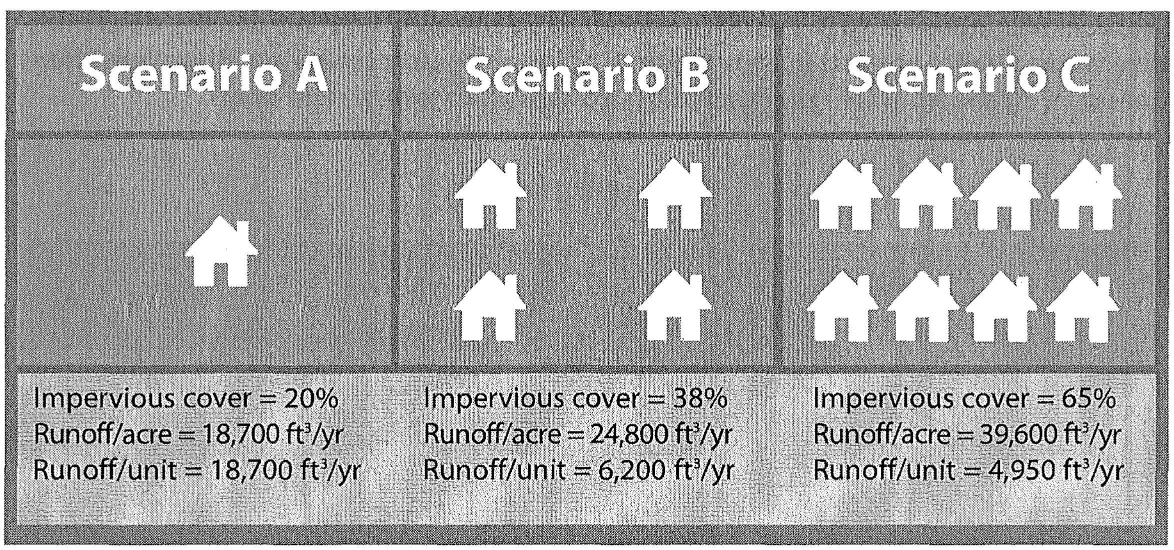
The results from the eight examples for all three scenarios are presented below.

**EXAMPLE 1:** ONE-ACRE LEVEL

| Scale of Analysis | Scenario A | Scenario B | Scenario C |
|---|---|---|---|
| One Acre | 1 house | 4 houses | 8 houses |

EPA examined one acre developed at three different densities: one house, four houses, and eight houses. The results are presented in Exhibit 3. As Exhibit 3 demonstrates, the overall percent imperviousness for Scenario A is approximately 20 percent with one house per acre, 38 percent for Scenario B with four houses per acre, and 65 percent for Scenario C with eight houses per acre (Soil Conservation Service, 1986).

**EXHIBIT 3:** Total Average Annual Stormwater Runoff for All Scenarios



Examining the estimated average annual runoff at the acre level, as illustrated in Exhibit 4, the low-density Scenario A, with just one house, produces an average runoff volume of 18,700 cubic feet per year ($ft^3/yr$). Scenario C, with eight houses, produces 39,600 $ft^3/yr$, and Scenario B falls between Scenarios A and C at 24,800 $ft^3/yr$. In short, looking at the comparative differences between scenarios, runoff roughly doubles as the number of houses increases from one house per acre to eight houses per acre. Scenario C, with more houses on the acre, has the greatest amount of impervious surface cover and thus generates the most runoff at the acre level.

Looking at the comparative difference of how much runoff each individual house produces, in Scenario A, one house yields 18,700 $ft^3/yr$, the same as the per acre level. In the denser Scenario C, however, each house produces 4,950 $ft^3/yr$ average runoff. The middle scenario, Scenario B, produces considerably less runoff—6,200 $ft^3/yr$—per house than Scenario A, but more than Scenario C. Each house in Scenario B produces approximately 67 percent less runoff than a house in Scenario A, and each house in Scenario C produces 74 percent less runoff than a house in Scenario A. This is because the houses in Scenarios B and C create less impervious surface per house than the house in Scenario A. Therefore, per house, each home in the higher-density communities results in less stormwater runoff.

Each house in Scenario B produces approximately 67 percent less runoff than a house in Scenario A, and each house in Scenario C produces 74 percent less runoff than a house in Scenario A.

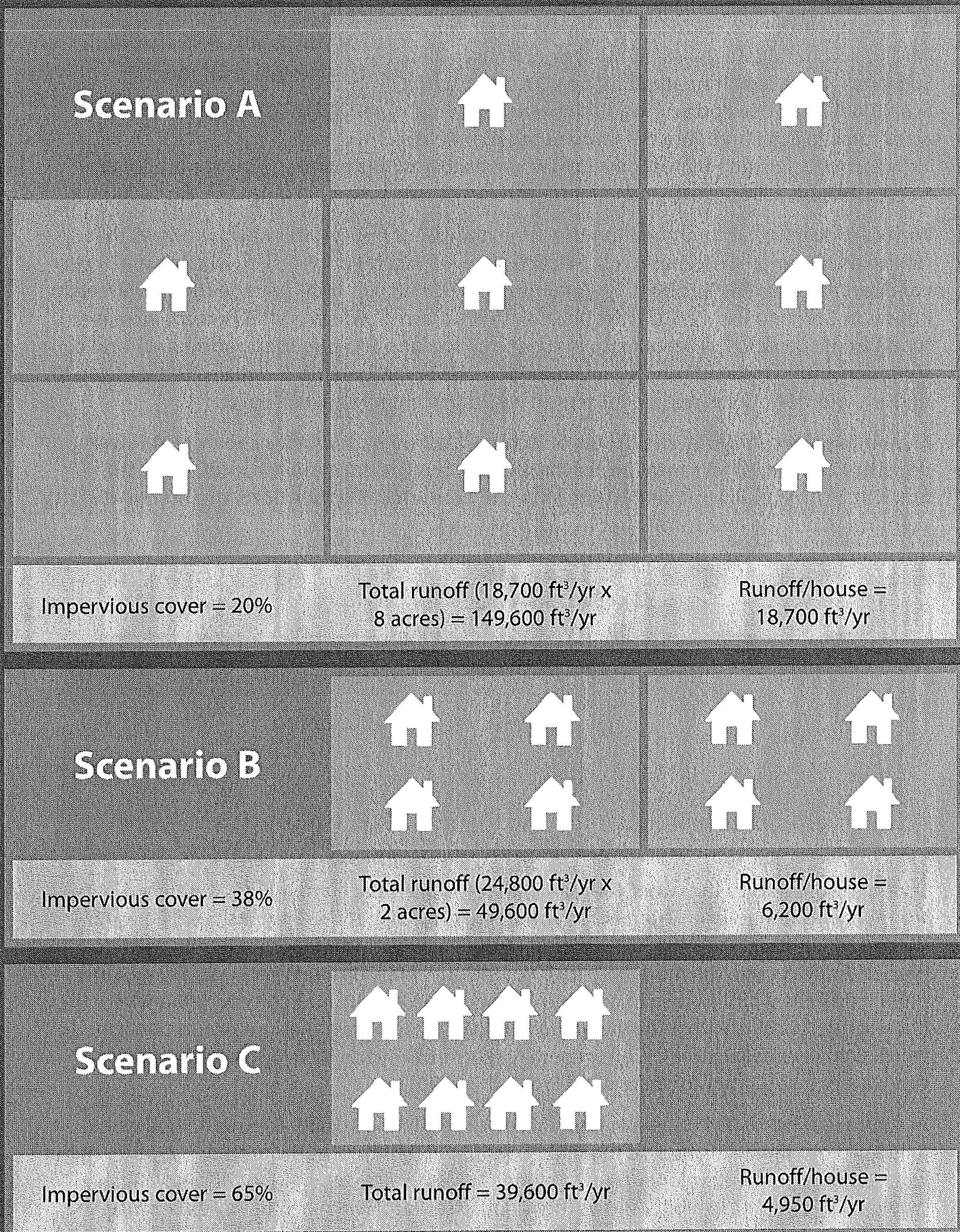
Modeling at the acre level demonstrates that, in this example, when density is quadrupled (from one house to four houses), stormwater runoff increases by one-third per acre, but decreases by two-thirds per house. Moreover, when density increases by a factor of eight—from one house to eight houses—stormwater runoff doubles per acre, but decreases by almost three-quarters per house.

**These results indicate when runoff is measured by the acre, limiting density does minimize water quality impacts compared to the higher-density scenarios. However, when measured by the house, higher densities produce less stormwater runoff.**

**EXAMPLE 2:** LOT LEVEL

| Scale of Analysis | Scenario A | Scenario B | Scenario C |
|---|---|---|---|
| Lot | 8 houses built on 8 acres | 8 houses built on 2 acres | 8 houses built on 1 acre |

**EXHIBIT 4:** Each Scenario Accommodates Eight Houses



For each development to accommodate the same number of houses, the lower-density scenarios require more land to accommodate the same number of houses that Scenario C has accommodated on one acre. Specifically, Scenario A must develop seven additional acres, or eight acres total, to accommodate the same number of houses as Scenario C. Scenario B must develop two acres to accommodate the same number of houses. Exhibit 4 illustrates.

The increase in runoff for Scenario A is due to the additional land consumption.

With each scenario accommodating the same number of houses, this analysis shows that total average runoff in Scenario A is 149,600 $ft^3$/yr (18,700 $ft^3$/yr x 8 acres), which is a 278 percent increase from the 39,600 $ft^3$/yr total runoff in Scenario C. Total average runoff from eight houses in Scenario B is 49,600 $ft^3$/yr (24,800 $ft^3$/yr x 2 acres), which is a 25 percent increase in runoff from Scenario C. The increase in runoff for Scenario A is due to the additional land consumption and associated runoff. The impervious cover for Scenario A remains the same at 20 percent, but now, seven additional acres have 20 percent impervious cover.

**Examining the comparative difference in runoff between scenarios shows that lower densities can create less total impervious cover, but produce more runoff when the number of houses is kept consistent between scenarios. Furthermore, the higher-density scenario produces less runoff per house and per lot.**

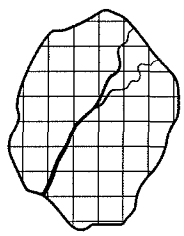
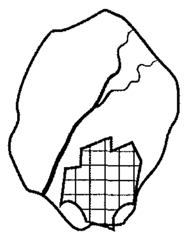
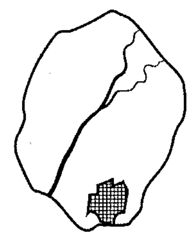
### EXAMPLE 3: WATERSHED LEVEL

| Scale of Analysis | Scenario A | Scenario B | Scenario C |
|---|---|---|---|
| Watershed—Each 10,000-acre watershed accommodates the same number of houses | 10,000 houses built on 10,000 acres | 10,000 houses built on 2,500 acres | 10,000 houses built on 1,250 acres |

Taking the analysis to the watershed level, EPA examined the comparative watershed stormwater runoff impacts from accommodating growth at different densities. The watershed used in this analysis is a hypothetical 10,000-acre watershed accommodating only houses. As discussed, the modeling does not include retail, business centers, farms, or any other land uses typically seen in communities, nor does it take into consideration where the development occurs within the watershed. Research has shown that upper sub-watersheds, which contain smaller streams, are generally more sensitive to development than lower sub-watersheds (Center for Watershed Protection, 2001).

Accommodating 10,000 houses at one house per acre in the 10,000-acre watershed would fully build out the watershed. At the higher density of four houses per acre, one-quarter of the watershed would be developed, and at eight houses per acre, one-eighth of the watershed would be developed. Exhibit 5 shows the runoff associated with each of these scenarios.

**EXHIBIT 5:** 10,000-Acre Watershed Accommodating 10,000 Houses

| Scenario A | Scenario B | Scenario C |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  |
| 10,000 houses built on 10,000 acres produce: | 10,000 houses built on 2,500 acres produce: | 10,000 houses built on 1,250 acres produce: |
| 10,000 acres x 1 house x 18,700 $ft^3$/yr of runoff = | 2,500 acres x 4 houses x 6,200 $ft^3$/yr of runoff = | 1,250 acres x 8 houses x 4,950 $ft^3$/yr of runoff = |
| **187 million $ft^3$/yr of stormwater runoff** | **62 million $ft^3$/yr of stormwater runoff** | **49.5 million $ft^3$/yr of stormwater runoff** |
| **Site: 20% impervious cover** | **Site: 38% impervious cover** | **Site: 65% impervious cover** |
| **Watershed: 20% impervious cover** | **Watershed: 9.5% impervious cover** | **Watershed: 8.1% impervious cover** |

As Exhibit 5 illustrates, if development occurs at a lower density, e.g., one house per acre, the entire watershed will be built out, generating 187 million $ft^3$/yr of stormwater runoff. Scenario B, at four houses per acre, consumes less land and produces approximately 62 million $ft^3$/yr of stormwater runoff, while Scenario C, at the highest density, consumes the least amount of land and produces just 49.5 million $ft^3$/yr of stormwater runoff. Looking at the comparative differences, Scenario A generates approximately three times as much runoff from development as Scenario B, and approximately four times as much stormwater runoff as Scenario C.

Exhibit 5 also illustrates that, in this example, overall impervious cover for the watershed decreases as site density increases. Scenario C, which has a lot-level imperviousness of 65 percent, has a watershed-level imperviousness of only 8.1 percent, which is lower than the 10

Overall impervious cover for the watershed decreases as site density increases.

percent threshold discussed earlier. Scenario B, with a density of four houses per acre, has a site-level impervious cover of 38 percent, but a watershed imperviousness of 9.5 percent, which is still lower than the 10 percent threshold. Finally, Scenario A, at a lot-level imperviousness of 20 percent, has the same overall imperviousness at the watershed level. **Both of the higher-density scenarios consume less land and maintain below-the-threshold imperviousness.**

This simplistic illustration demonstrates a basic point of this analysis—higher-density developments can minimize stormwater impacts because they consume less land than their lower-density counterparts. For example, imagine if Manhattan, which accommodates 1.54 million people on 14,720 acres (23 square miles) (Census, 2000), were developed not at its current density of 52 houses per acre, but at one or four houses per acre. At one house per acre, Manhattan would need approximately 750,000 more acres, or an additional 1,170 square miles, to accommodate its current population at two people per household. That's approximately the size of Rhode Island. At four houses per acre, Manhattan would need approximately 175,000 more acres, or an additional 273 square miles.

At one house per acre, Manhattan would need approximately 750,000 more acres, or an additional 1,170 square miles, to accommodate its current population at two people per household.

Reducing land consumption is crucial to preserving water quality because, as discussed previously, preserving large, continuous areas of open space and sensitive ecological areas is critical for maintaining watershed services. In addition, because of their dense development pattern, Scenarios B and C may realize additional stormwater benefits if the developed land is appropriately sited in the watershed to protect sensitive ecological areas, such as headwaters, wetlands, riparian corridors, and floodplains.

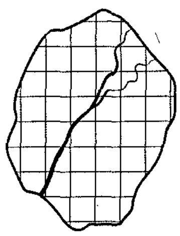
### **Example 4:** Remaining Land in the Watershed Developed

What happens if the remaining undeveloped parts of the watershed in Scenarios B and C are developed? Exhibit 6 considers this situation.

| Scale of Analysis | Scenario A | Scenario B | Scenario C |
|---|---|---|---|
| Watershed—Each 10,000-acre watershed is fully built out at different densities | 10,000 houses built on 10,000 acres | 40,000 houses built on 10,000 acres | 80,000 houses built on 10,000 acres |

**EXHIBIT 6:** 10,000-Acre Watershed Accommodating Different Numbers of Houses

## Scenario A



The watershed is fully built out at *1 house per acre.* 10,000 acres accommodates **10,000 houses**, translating to:

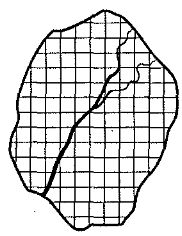
10,000 acres x 1 house x 18,700 $ft^3$/yr of runoff =

**187 million $ft^3$/yr stormwater runoff**

**Site: 20% impervious cover**

**Watershed: 20% impervious cover**

## Scenario B



The watershed is fully built out at *4 houses per acre*. 10,000 acres accommodates **40,000 houses**, translating to:

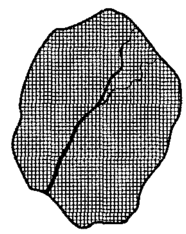
10,000 acres x 4 houses x 6,200 $ft^3$/yr of runoff =

**248 million $ft^3$/yr stormwater runoff**

**Site: 38% impervious cover**

**Watershed: 38% impervious cover**

## Scenario C



The watershed is fully built out at 8 *houses per acre*. 10,000 acres accommodates **80,000 houses**, translating to:

10,000 acres x 8 houses x 4,950 $ft^3$/yr of runoff =

**396 million $ft^3$/yr stormwater runoff**

**Site: 65% impervious cover**

**Watershed: 65% impervious cover**

Each watershed is fully built out, and the watershed developed at the highest density (Scenario C) is generating approximately double the total stormwater runoff of Scenario A. Scenario B is generating approximately one-third more runoff than Scenario A. Similar to the acre-level and lot-level results, Scenario C has the highest degree of impervious cover at 65 percent, while Scenario A maintains the lowest level at 20 percent.

Scenarios A and B accommodate only a small portion of the expected growth. The rest will have to be built in other watersheds.

The higher densities found in Scenario B and C are degrading their watershed services to a greater extent than Scenario A. However, the number of houses accommodated in each community is not the same. Scenario B is accommodating **30,000 more houses** (four times the number of Scenario A), and Scenario C is accommodating **70,000 more houses** (eight times the number of Scenario A). Recall that density limits shift growth and do not generally affect the total amount of growth in a given time period. Therefore, this is not a fair comparison. Scenarios A and B accommodate only one-eighth and one-half, respectively, of the 80,000 houses accommodated in Scenario C. Where do the other houses, households, and families go? To get a true appreciation for the effects of density, Scenarios A and B must also show where those homes will be accommodated. It is likely that they would be built in nearby or adjacent watersheds. Our hypothetical community that develops at one house per acre (Scenario A) is able to accommodate only 10,000 houses. For the community that develops at that density to accommodate the same number of houses that Scenario C contains, it must disturb and develop land from nearby or adjacent watersheds.

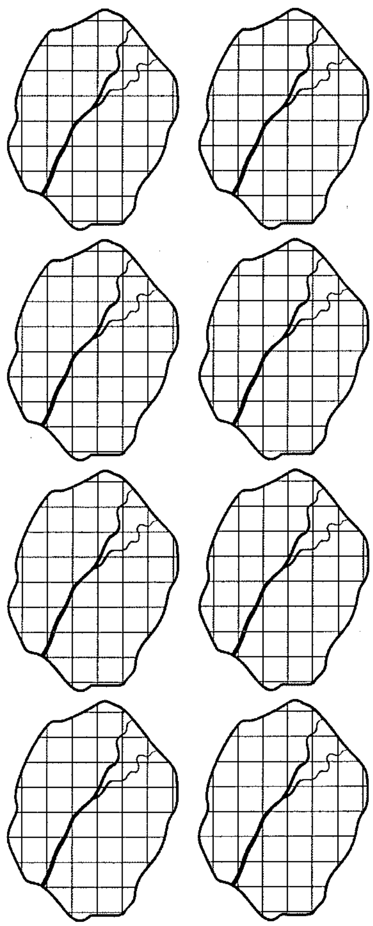
**EXAMPLE 5:** ACCOMMODATING THE SAME NUMBER OF HOUSES

| Scale of Analysis | Scenario A | Scenario B | Scenario C |
|---|---|---|---|
| Watershed—Each scenario accommodates the same number of houses | 1 house per acre—80,000 houses consume 8 watersheds | 4 houses per acre—80,000 houses consume 2 watersheds | 8 houses per acre—80,000 houses consume 1 watershed |

As discussed, the U.S. population will increase by an estimated 50 million people by 2020. Different areas of the country will grow at different rates in the future. Whether a region anticipates 1,000 or 80,000 new households to come to the region over the next 10 years, comparisons between build-out scenarios must keep the number of homes consistent. In this case, if Scenario C is developed so that its entire watershed is built out to 80,000 houses, then for a fair comparison, Scenarios A and B must also include 80,000 houses. Exhibit 7 illustrates this situation.

**EXHIBIT 7:** 80,000 Houses Accommodated

## Scenario A



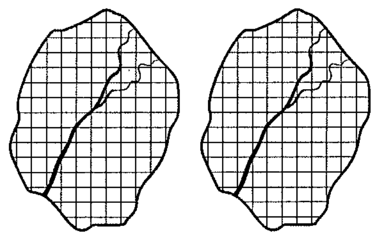
At 1 house per acre, 80,000 houses require 80,000 acres, or *8 watersheds*, translating to:

80,000 acres x 1 house x 18,700 $ft^3$/yr of runoff =

**1.496 billion $ft^3$/yr of stormwater runoff**

**8 watersheds at 20% impervious cover**

## Scenario B



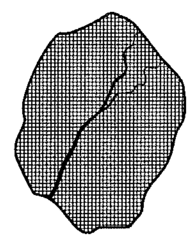
At 4 houses per acre, 80,000 houses require 20,000 acres, or *2 watersheds*, translating to:

20,000 acres x 4 houses x 6,200 $ft^3$/yr of runoff =

**496 million $ft^3$/yr of stormwater runoff**

**2 watersheds at 38% impervious cover**

## Scenario C



At 8 houses per acre, 80,000 houses require 10,000 acres, or *1 watershed*, translating to:

10,000 acres x 8 houses x 4,950 $ft^3$/yr of runoff =

**396 million $ft^3$/yr of stormwater runoff**

**1 watershed at 65% impervious cover**

When the number of houses is kept consistent, Scenario A would need to develop an *additional seven watersheds* (assuming the same size watersheds) and Scenario B would need to develop *one additional watershed* to accommodate the same growth found in Scenario C.

As Exhibit 7 demonstrates, for Scenario A to accommodate the additional 70,000 homes already accommodated in Scenario C, it must develop another seven watersheds. This generates 1.496 billion $ft^3$/yr of stormwater runoff. Scenario C, with a development density of eight houses per acre, has still developed just one watershed and is generating approximately 74 percent less stormwater runoff than Scenario A—or 396 million $ft^3$/yr. Scenario B, at four houses per acre, is generating 496 million $ft^3$/yr runoff, or two-thirds less runoff than Scenario A, but 100 million $ft^3$/yr more than Scenario C.

Scenario A would need to develop an *additional seven watersheds* and Scenario B would need to develop *one additional watershed* in order to accommodate the same growth found in Scenario C.

**Example 6:** Time Series Build-out Analysis: Build-out in 2000

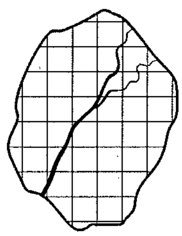
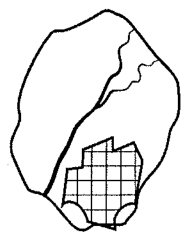
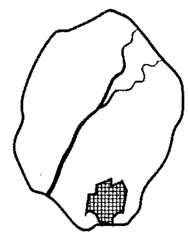
| Scale of Analysis | Scenario A | Scenario B | Scenario C |
|---|---|---|---|
| Hypothetical build-out in the year 2000 | 10,000 houses built on 10,000 acres | 10,000 houses built on 2,500 acres | 10,000 houses built on 1,250 acres |

Another way to examine this issue is to look at what happens to build-out of the three scenarios over time. A basic assumption for EPA's modeling is that growth is coming to the hypothetical community, and that growth will be accommodated within a fixed time horizon. But what happens to growth in the hypothetical community over several, sequential time horizons?

Given the dynamic nature of population growth, what will build-out look like in the hypothetical community in 2000, 2020, and 2040 at different development densities? The next several examples examine the amount of land required to accommodate increasing populations within a watershed that develops at different densities. The purpose of this time series build-out is to examine how much land is consumed as the population grows in 20-year increments.

Starting in the year 2000, the three watersheds each begin with 10,000 homes. The only difference between the watersheds is the densities at which the building occurs. In 2000, they might look something like Exhibit 8.

**EXHIBIT 8:** Time Series Build-out Analysis: Build-out in 2000

| Scenario A | Scenario B | Scenario C |
|---|---|---|
|  |  |  |
| 10,000 houses on 10,000 acres at a density of *1 house per acre* consume 1 entire watershed. | 10,000 houses on 2,500 acres at a density of *4 houses per acre* consume ¼ of 1 watershed. | 10,000 houses on 1,250 acres at a density of *8 houses per acre* consume ⅛ of 1 watershed. |

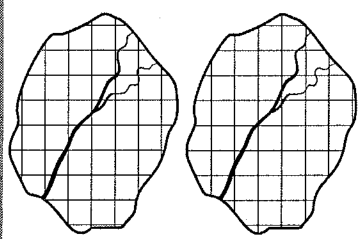
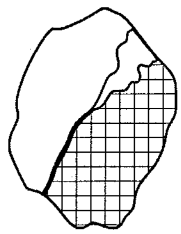
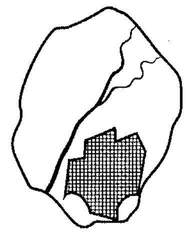
As previously demonstrated in Example 3, building at higher densities consumes, or converts, less land within the watershed. Scenario A, developing at one unit per acre, requires the entire 10,000-acre watershed to accommodate 10,000 houses. Scenario C, on the other hand, developing at eight units an acre, requires significantly less land to accommodate the same amount of development.

**EXAMPLE 7:** TIME SERIES BUILD-OUT ANALYSIS: BUILD-OUT IN 2020

| Scale of Analysis | Scenario A | Scenario B | Scenario C |
|---|---|---|---|
| Hypothetical build-out in the year 2020 | 20,000 houses built on 20,000 acres, or 2 watersheds | 20,000 houses built on 5,000 acres, or ½ of 1 watershed | 20,000 houses built on 2,500 acres, or ¼ of 1 watershed |

Fast-forwarding 20 years, the population in the hypothetical community has doubled from 10,000 houses to 20,000 houses. Each scenario must accommodate this additional growth at different development densities. Exhibit 9 demonstrates how this development might look.

**EXHIBIT 9:** Time Series Build-out Analysis: Build-out in 2020

| Scenario A | Scenario B | Scenario C |
|---|---|---|
|  |  |  |
| 20,000 houses accommodated on 20,000 acres at a density of *1 house per acre* will consume 2 watersheds. | 20,000 houses accommodated on 5,000 acres at a density of *4 houses per acre* will consume ½ of 1 watershed. | 20,000 houses accommodated on 2,500 acres at a density of *eight houses per acre* will consume ¼ of 1 watershed. |

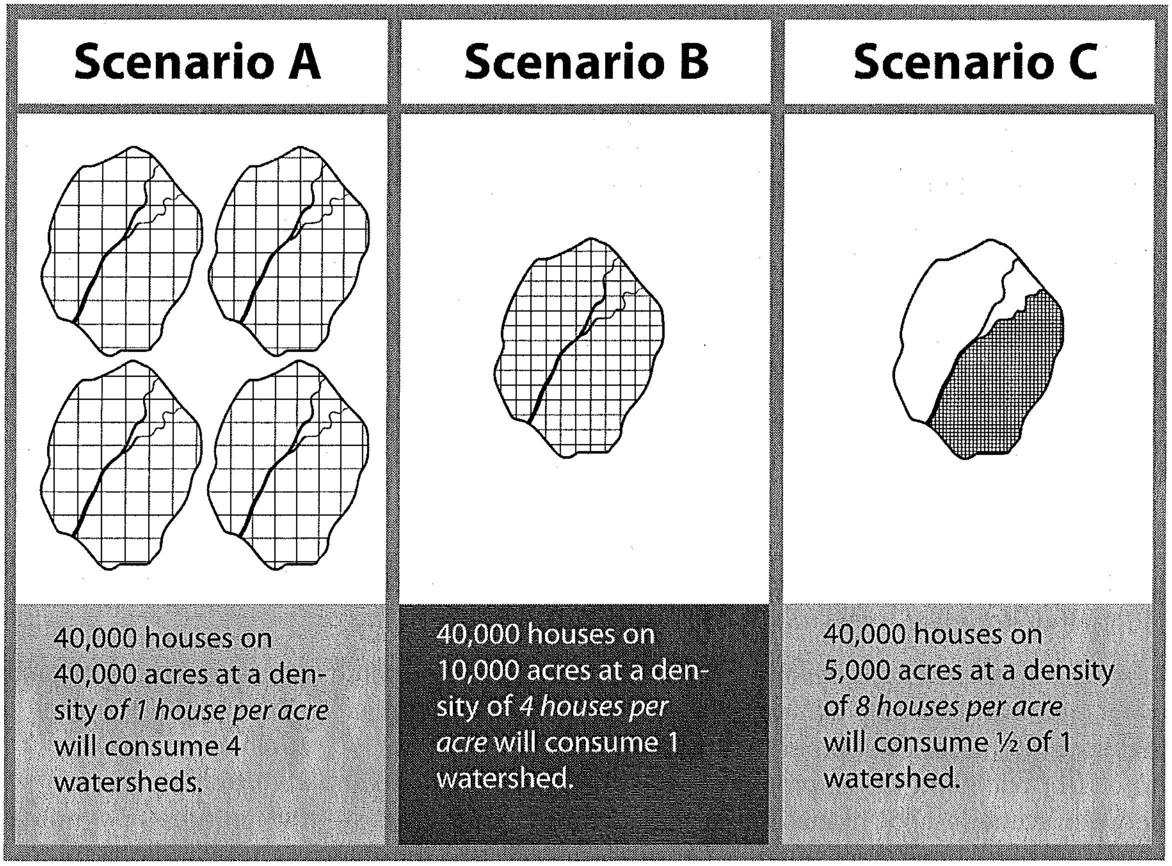
As Exhibit 9 demonstrates, Scenario A, developing at one house per acre, requires another whole watershed to accommodate the additional growth. Scenarios B and C, developing at higher densities, can accommodate the additional growth within the same watershed. Moreover, by developing at higher densities within the watershed, ample open space or otherwise undeveloped land remains to perform critical watershed functions. No such land exists in Scenario A, and, as previously discussed, lawns typically associated with one house per acre are not able to provide the same type of watershed services as forests, meadows, or other types of unconverted land.

**EXAMPLE 8:** TIME SERIES BUILD-OUT ANALYSIS: BUILD-OUT IN 2040

| Scale of Analysis | Scenario A | Scenario B | Scenario C |
|---|---|---|---|
| Hypothetical build-out in the year 2040 | 40,000 houses built on 40,000 acres, or 4 watersheds | 40,000 houses built on 10,000 acres, or 1 watershed | 40,000 houses built on 5,000 acres, or ½ of 1 watershed |

The hypothetical community continues to grow and, in another 20 years, population has doubled again, requiring each scenario to accommodate 20,000 more homes at different development densities. Exhibit 10 demonstrates how this development might look.

**EXHIBIT 10:** Time Series Build-out Analysis: Build-out in 2040




As Exhibit 10 demonstrates, Scenario A, developing at one house per acre, must develop land in four watersheds, or 40,000 acres, to accommodate all its houses. Scenario B, developing at a slightly higher density, uses its remaining land to accommodate the additional growth. Scenario C is still developing within the same watershed and still has additional land available to provide watershed services. Scenario A and B do not. Any land for watershed services would need to come from additional watersheds.

Lower-density development always requires more land than higher densities to accommodate the same amount of growth.

**This build-out analysis can continue indefinitely with the same result: lower-density development always requires more land than higher densities to accommodate the same amount of growth. Because more land is required, more undeveloped land is converted.**

## Findings/Discussion

The results indicate when runoff is measured *by the acre*, limiting density does produce less stormwater runoff when compared to the higher-density scenarios. However, when measured *by the house*, higher densities produce less stormwater runoff. So, which is the appropriate measure?

Typically, a planning department analyzes the projected stormwater runoff impacts of a developer's proposal based on the acreage, not the number of houses being built. Based on the results from the one-acre level example, communities might conclude that lower-density development would minimize runoff. Runoff from one house on one acre is roughly half the runoff from eight houses. However, where did the other houses, and the people who live in those houses, go? The answer is almost always that they went somewhere else in that region—very often somewhere within the same watershed. Thus, those households still have a stormwater impact. To better understand the stormwater runoff impacts from developing at low densities, the impacts associated with those houses locating elsewhere need to be taken into account. This approach has two advantages:

- It acknowledges that the choice is not whether to grow by one house or eight but is instead where and how to accommodate the eight houses (or whatever number by which the region is expected to grow).
- It emphasizes minimization of total imperviousness and runoff within a region or watershed rather than from particular sites—which is more consistent with the science indicating that imperviousness within the watershed is critical.

To more fully explore this dynamic, EPA modeled scenarios at three scales—one acre, lot, and watershed—and at three different time series build-out examples to examine the premise that lower-density development better protects water quality. EPA examined stormwater runoff from different development densities to determine the comparative difference between scenarios. The higher-density scenarios generated less stormwater runoff per house at all scales and time series build-out examples. Exhibit 11 summarizes these findings.

## EXHIBIT 11: Summary of Findings

| Scenario | Number of Acres Developed | Impervious Cover (%) | Total Runoff ($ft^3/yr$) | Runoff Per Unit ($ft^3/yr$) | Savings Over Scenario A: runoff per unit (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *One-Acre Level: Different densities developed on one acre* | | | | | |
| A: One house/acre | 1 | 20.0 | 18,700 | 18,700 | 0 |
| B: Four houses/acre | 1 | 38.0 | 24,800 | 6,200 | 67 |
| C: Eight houses/acre | 1 | 65.0 | 39,600 | 4,950 | 74 |
| *Lot Level: Eight houses accommodated at different density levels* | | | | | |
| Scenario A | 8 | 20.0 | 149,600 | 18,700 | 0 |
| Scenario B | 2 | 38.0 | 49,600 | 6,200 | 67 |
| Scenario C | 1 | 65.0 | 39,600 | 4,950 | 74 |
| *Watershed Level: 10,000 houses accommodated in one 10,000-acre watershed* | | | | | |
| Scenario A | 10,000 | 20.0 | 187 M | 18,700 | 0 |
| Scenario B | 2,500 | 9.5 | 62 M | 6,200 | 67 |
| Scenario C | 1,250 | 8.1 | 49.5 M | 4,950 | 74 |

| Scenario | Summary of Build-out Examples |
|---|---|
| *Watershed Level: Time Series Build-out Analysis: Build-out in 2000* | |
| Scenario A | 10,000 houses built on 10,000 acres: 1 watershed is consumed |
| Scenario B | 10,000 houses built on 2,500 acres: ¼ of 1 watershed is consumed |
| Scenario C | 10,000 houses built on 1,250 acres: ⅛ of 1 watershed is consumed |
| *Watershed Level: Time Series Build-out Analysis: Build-out in 2020* | |
| Scenario A | 20,000 houses built on 20,000 acres: 2 watersheds are consumed |
| Scenario B | 20,000 houses built on 5,000 acres: ½ of 1 watershed is consumed |
| Scenario C | 20,000 houses built on 2,500 acres: ¼ of 1 watershed is consumed |
| *Watershed Level: Time Series Build-out Analysis: Build-out in 2040* | |
| Scenario A | 40,000 houses built on 40,000 acres: 4 watersheds are consumed |
| Scenario B | 40,000 houses built on 10,000 acres: 1 watershed is consumed |
| Scenario C | 40,000 houses built on 5,000 acres: ½ of 1 watershed is consumed |

Specifically, this analysis demonstrates:

- With more dense development (Scenario C), runoff rates per house decrease by approximately 74 percent from the least dense scenario (Scenario A);
- For the same amount of development, denser development produces less runoff and less impervious cover than low-density development; and
- For a given amount of growth, lower-density development uses more of the watershed.

EPA found that the higher-density scenarios generate less stormwater runoff per house at all scales—one acre, lot, watershed—and time series build-out examples.

Taken together, these findings indicate that low-density development may not always be the preferred strategy for reducing stormwater runoff. In addition, the findings indicate that higher densities may better protect water quality—especially at the lot and watershed levels. Higher-density developments consume less land to accommodate the same number of houses as lower density. Consuming less land means less impervious cover is created within the watershed. To better protect watershed function, communities must preserve large, continuous areas of open space and protect sensitive ecological areas, regardless of how densely they develop.

However, while increasing densities on a regional scale can, on the whole, better protect water resources at a regional level, higher-density development can have more site-level impervious cover, which can exacerbate water quality problems in nearby or adjacent waterbodies. To address this increased impervious cover, numerous site-level techniques are available to mitigate development impacts. When used in combination with regional techniques, these site-level techniques can prevent, treat, and store runoff and associated pollutants. Many of these practices incorporate some elements of low-impact development techniques (e.g., rain gardens, bioretention areas, and grass swales), although others go further to include changing site-design practices, such as reducing parking spaces, narrowing streets, and eliminating cul-de-sacs. Incorporating these techniques can help communities meet their water quality goals and create more interesting and enjoyable neighborhoods.

A University of Oregon study, *Measuring Stormwater Impacts of Different Neighborhood Development Patterns* (University of Oregon, 2001), supports this conclusion. The study, which included a study site near Corvallis, Oregon, compared stormwater management strategies in three common neighborhood development patterns. For example, best management practices, such as disconnecting

Photo courtesy of the City of Portland, Oregon

The city of Portland, Oregon, is developing urban stormwater strategies, such as these curb extensions that can absorb the street's runoff from large storm events.

residential roofs and paved areas from the stormwater system, introducing swales and water detention ponds into the storm sewer system, and strategically locating open space, considerably reduced peak water runoff and improved infiltration. The study concluded that "some of the most effective opportunities for reducing stormwater runoff and decreasing peak flow are at the site scale and depend on strategic integration with other site planning and design decisions." The study also found that planting strips and narrower streets significantly reduced the amount of pavement and, as a result, runoff in developed areas.

A development in Tacoma, Washington, demonstrates that increasing densities and addressing stormwater at the site level can work effectively. The Salishan Housing District was built on Tacoma's eastern edge in the 1940s as temporary housing for ship workers. It is currently a public housing community with 855 units.

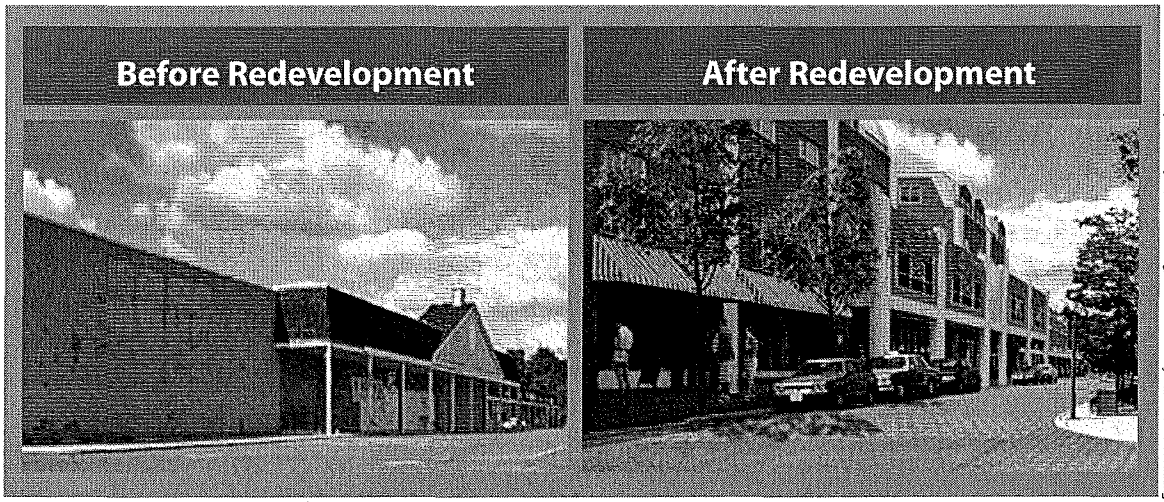
Redevelopment of Salishan will increase densities to include 1,200 homes (public housing, affordable and market rate rentals, and for-sale units), local retail, a farmers market, a senior housing facility, a daycare center, a health clinic, commercial office space, and an expanded community center. Among the most important priorities for the redevelopment is restoring the water quality of Swan Creek, which forms the eastern edge of Salishan. The creek is a spawning ground for indigenous salmon populations that feed into the Puyallup River and Puget Sound. The site plan seeks to restore 65 percent of the land to forest and pervious landscape. In addition, the streets will be narrowed to reduce impervious surfaces and also make the neighborhood more inviting for walking. Some streets may be eliminated and replaced with pedestrian paths. The remaining streets will be bordered by rain gardens that would accept, filter, and evapotranspire runoff. Most existing street surfaces would be reused, although some may be replaced with pervious pavers.

Salishan Housing District is replacing 855 public housing units with 1,200 units. Numerous site-level strategies, such as integrating uses, narrowing the streets, installing rain gardens, and daylighting a stream, are used to restore the water quality of Swan Creek and revitalize an existing neighborhood.

Communities can enjoy a further reduction in runoff if they take advantage of underused properties, such as infill, brownfield, or greyfield[12] sites. For example, an abandoned shopping center (a greyfield property) is often almost completely impervious cover and is already producing high volumes of runoff (Sobel, 2002). If this property were redeveloped, the net runoff increase would likely be zero since the property was already predominately impervious cover. In many cases, redevelopment of these properties breaks up or removes some portion of the impervious cover, converting it to pervious cover and allowing for some stormwater infiltration. In this case, redevelopment of these properties can produce a net improvement in regional water quality by decreasing total runoff. Exhibit 12 illustrates this opportunity.

[12] Greyfield sites generally refer to abandoned or underutilized shopping malls, strip malls, or other areas that have significant paved surface and little or no contamination.

**EXHIBIT 12:** Redevelopment of a Greyfield Property




Photos courtesy of Juan Ayala, Invisioneering, for the New Jersey Office of State Planning

Redevelopment of a former shopping mall in Boca Raton, Florida, provides an example of this type of opportunity. The Mizner Park shopping mall was redesigned from its original pattern of a large retail structure surrounded by surface parking lots; the 29-acre site now includes 272 apartments and townhouses, 103,000 square feet of office space, and 156,000 square feet of retail space. Most parking is accommodated in four multistory parking garages. Designed as a village within a city, the project has a density five times higher than the rest of the city and a mix of large and small retailers, restaurants, and entertainment venues (Cooper, 2003). Most significantly, the final build-out of Mizner Park decreased overall impervious surface on the site by 15 percent through the addition of a central park plaza, flower and tree planters, and a large public amphitheater.

Redeveloping brownfield and greyfield sites can reduce regional land consumption. A recent George Washington University study found that for every brownfield acre that is redeveloped, 4.5 acres of open space are preserved (Deason, 2001). In addition to redeveloping brownfield sites, regions can identify underused properties or land, such as infill or greyfield sites, and target those areas for redevelopment. For example, a recent analysis by King County, Washington, demonstrated that property that is vacant and eligible for redevelopment in the county's growth areas can accommodate 263,000 new houses—enough for

Photo courtesy of U.S. EPA

The redevelopment of Mizner Park, a former shopping mall, decreased impervious cover by 15 percent through the addition of this central plaza.

500,000 people (Pryne, 2002). Redeveloping this property is an opportunity to accommodate new growth without expanding into other watersheds. As Kurt Zwikl, executive director of the Pottstown, Pennsylvania-based Schuylkill River Greenway Association, said, "Certainly, if we can get redevelopment going in brownfields and old industrial sites in older riverfront boroughs like Pottstown and Norristown, that's a greenfield further out in the watershed that has been preserved to absorb more stormwater" (Brandt, 2004).

Redeveloping brownfield and greyfield sites can reduce regional land consumption.

## Other Research

Current research supports the findings of this study. Several site-specific studies have been conducted across the United States and in Australia that examine stormwater runoff and associated pollutants in relation to different development patterns and densities. Several case studies approach the research question with varying levels of complexity. Studies of Highland Park, Australia; Belle Hall, South Carolina; New Jersey; Chicago, Illinois; and the Chesapeake Bay each analyze the differences in runoff and associated water pollution from different types of development patterns.

Queensland University of Technology, Gold Coast City Council, and the Department of Public Works in Brisbane, Australia, examined the relationship between water quality and six different land uses to offer practical guidance in planning future developments. When comparing monitored runoff and associated pollutants from six areas, they found the most protective strategy for water quality was high-density residential development (Goonetilleke, 2005).

The Belle Hall study, by the South Carolina Coastal Conservation League, examined the water quality impacts of two development alternatives for a 583-acre site in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina. The town planners used modeling to examine the potential water quality impacts of each site design. In the "Sprawl Scenario," the property was analyzed as if it developed along a conventional suburban pattern. The "Town Scenario" incorporated traditional neighborhood patterns. In each scenario, the overall density and intensity (the number of homes and the square feet of commercial and retail space) were held constant. The results found that the "Sprawl Scenario" consumed eight times more open space and generated 43 percent more runoff, four times more sediment, almost four times more nitrogen, and three times more phosphorous than the "Town Scenario" development (South Carolina Coastal Conservation League, 1995).

These findings hold at a larger, state scale. New Jersey's State Plan calls for increasing densities in the state by directing development to existing communities and existing infrastructure. Researchers at Rutgers University analyzed the water quality impacts from current development trends and compared them to water quality impacts from the proposed compact development. The study found that compact development would generate significantly less water pollution than current development patterns, which are mostly characterized by low-density development, for all categories of pollutants (Rutgers University, 2000). The reductions ranged from over 40 percent for phosphorus and nitrogen to 30 percent for runoff. These conclusions supported a similar statewide study completed in 1992 that concluded that compact development would result in 30 percent less runoff and 40 percent less water pollution than would a lower-density scenario (Burchell, 1995).

Researchers at Purdue University examined two possible project sites in the Chicago area (Harbor, 2000). The first site was in the city; the second was on the urban fringe. The study found that placing a hypothetical low-density development on the urban fringe would produce 10 times more runoff than a higher-density development in the urban core.

Finally, a study published by the Chesapeake Bay Foundation in 1996 comparing conventional and clustered suburban development on a rural Virginia tract found that clustering would convert 75 percent less land, create 42 percent less impervious surface, and produce 41 percent less stormwater runoff (Pollard, 2001). These studies suggest that a low-density approach to development is not always the preferred strategy for protecting water resources.

## Conclusions

Our regions, cities, towns, and neighborhoods are growing. Every day, new buildings or houses are proposed, planned, and built. Local governments, working with planners, citizen groups, and developers, are thinking about where and how this new development can enhance existing neighborhoods and also protect the community's natural environment. They are identifying the characteristics of development that can build vibrant neighborhoods, rich in natural and historic assets, with jobs, housing, and amenities for all types of people. They are directing growth to areas that will maintain and improve the buildings and infrastructure in which they have already invested. In addition to enjoying the many benefits of growth, communities are also grappling with growth's challenges, including development's impact on water resources.

Many communities assume that low-density development automatically protects water resources. This study has shown that this assumption is flawed and that pursuit of low-density development can in fact be counterproductive, contributing to high rates of land conversion and stormwater runoff and missing opportunities to preserve valuable land within watersheds.

The purpose of this study is to explore the effects of development density on stormwater runoff and to illustrate the problems with the assumption that low-density development is automatically a better strategy to protect water quality. To that end, three different development densities were modeled at the one-acre, lot, and watershed levels, as well as in the time series build-out examples. The modeling results suggest that low-density development is not always the preferred strategy for protecting water resources. Furthermore, the results seem to suggest that higher-density development could better protect regional water quality because it consumes less land to accommodate the same number of homes.

However, while this study shows that low-density development does not automatically better protect water resources, it does not conclude that high-density development is therefore necessarily more protective. This study has not considered all factors, such as location of development within the watershed, varying soil types, slope, advanced post-construction controls (and their performance over time), and many other factors. In that sense, this study concludes that there are good reasons to consider higher-density development as a strategy that can better protect water resources than lower-density development. However, any bias toward either is inappropriate from a water perspective. A superior approach to protect water resources locally is likely to be some combination of development densities, based on local factors, incorporating adequate open space, preserving critical ecological and buffer areas, and minimizing land disturbance.

These conclusions have implications for how communities can enjoy the benefits of growth and development while also protecting their water quality. Additional relevant information can be found in other resources, such as *Protecting Water Resources with Smart Growth* and *Using Smart Growth Techniques as Stormwater Best Management Practices.*[13] Both publications draw on the experience of local governments, which has shown that regional and site-specific strategies are most effective when implemented together. In addition, *Creating Great Neighborhoods: Density in Your Community*, by the Local Government Commission and the National Association of Realtors, can provide information on some of the other benefits from density that communities can enjoy.

## Additional relevant information can be found in these resources:

- *Protecting Water Resources with Smart Growth,* available at: www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/pdf/waterresources_with_sg.pdf.
- *Creating Great Neighborhoods: Density in Your Community,* available at: www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/pdf/density.pdf.

Nationwide, state and local governments are considering the environmental implications of development patterns. As low-density development and its attendant infrastructure consume previously undeveloped land and create stretches of impervious cover throughout a region, the environment is increasingly affected. In turn, these land alterations are not only likely to degrade the quality of the individual watershed, but are also likely to degrade a larger number of watersheds. EPA believes that increasing development densities is one strategy communities can use to minimize regional water quality impacts.

[13] Forthcoming EPA publication.

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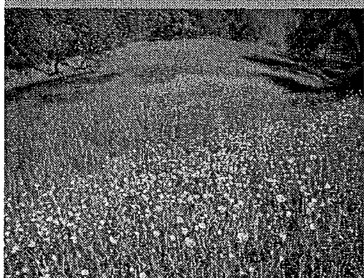

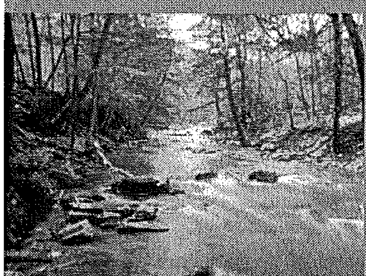


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