

Questions and Answers
How's My Waterway
www.epa.gov/mywaterway
October 18, 2012

1) What is “How's My Waterway?”

How's My Waterway is a new EPA tool – a website and app -- that helps users find information on the condition of their local waters quickly using a smart phone, tablet, or desktop computer. This tool for technical and non-technical users offers easy access, a local-area focus, plain-English terms and descriptions, and results within seconds, based on the same technical data found in EPA's water quality data system, ATTAINS.

2) How can I use “How's My Waterway?”

Users can retrieve information on assessments and reported condition of local waters for anywhere in the nation by searching based on zip code or place name. Results include a list and map of the waters within a roughly 5-mile radius, including which waters are assessed and polluted or healthy based on the most recent State reporting under the Clean Water Act. Selecting a specific waterway from the list or map then shows the pollutants reported, TMDL cleanup plans completed, and nonpoint pollution control projects in the area. See ‘Help’ for more detailed directions.

3) Why was “How's My Waterway” developed?

How's My Waterway was developed mainly to make EPA's public water quality information more easily accessible for the broadest possible user audience. EPA's national information system on water quality assessments -- ATTAINS -- is a technical database designed for specialized scientific and technical uses. For many years, EPA has compiled valuable nationwide information in ATTAINS on the condition of healthy and polluted waterways, gathered through Clean Water Act assessment and reporting by States and territories. For many Americans, however, one local lake or stream is a more important part of their lives than the thousands of waters described in our national statistics. Without being experts in water quality or databases, people have needed an easier way to learn about their local waters, their pollution problems and why they matter, and what's being done to improve conditions. Faced with a baffling array of scientific information and a complex technical database, an average citizen might say, “All I really want to know is, how's MY waterway? And please tell me in words I understand.”

4) What are the system requirements?

How's My Waterway is fully functional when accessed through browsers such as Firefox, Google Chrome, Internet Explorer and Safari using your desktop computer, tablet, or smart phone.

5) Is “How's My Waterway” a smart phone app?

Yes, in part -- a smart phone or tablet user can consult *How's My Waterway* outdoors at the water's edge, and retrieve information for that specific waterway with the ‘Use My Location’ option, or search anywhere in the U.S. with the ‘Choose a Location’ option. The mobile component of *How's My Waterway* is not a native app, but rather a generic mobile web app.

6) How much space on my smart phone will “How’s My Waterway” require?

Virtually none. *How’s My Waterway* is a mobile web app and website, so there is no downloading or installing required. The maps and water quality information reside on the website that is accessed by your phone. All that will be on your smart phone is the bookmarked icon.

7) How do I save a “How’s My Waterway” bookmark on my smart phone?

It depends on the kind of smart phone and browser you have. For iPhone: Open the Safari browser and type in www.epa.gov/mywaterway. Tap on the ‘Add Bookmark’ icon in the middle of the bottom bar (usually appears as a rectangular box with an arrow or a plus sign), select ‘Add to Home Screen,’ and touch ‘Add’ in the upper right corner. The same steps will work in the iPad, except the ‘Add Bookmark’ icon usually appears in the upper left corner. For Android: Open the internet browser and type in www.epa.gov/mywaterway. Press the settings/options button at bottom of phone, tap on ‘Add bookmark’ (for some models you may have to tap on “more” first), then select ‘ok.’ Now tap on the bookmark button within the browser (usually appears in the upper right corner) and touch and hold for 2 seconds the bookmark of *How’s My Waterway*. Tap on the ‘Add shortcut to home’ option in the menu that pops up. The *How’s My Waterway* icon will now appear on your home screen. *How’s My Waterway* is not available from app stores.

8) I have no science background, but I care about pollution – will I understand “How’s My Waterway?”

Yes. Much of the effort in developing *How’s My Waterway* went into rewording technical water pollution information for non-technical audiences. This “plain-English” approach uses understandable pollutant names, and explains water quality assessment and reporting. *How’s My Waterway* also offers ½ page summaries about all of the major types of water pollution – what it is, where it comes from, how it can harm the environment or human health, and what people can do to help.

9) Would a technical person have any reason to use “How’s My Waterway?”

Yes, because they can quickly connect to data for any specific locality. *How’s My Waterway* can help them retrieve technical data on a specific local waterway much more quickly than drilling down through the ATTAINS data system from the national level. Further, when *How’s My Waterway* displays waterway-specific results, ‘Technical Report’ buttons route users instantly into ATTAINS where they can view the local waterbody report and other technical information directly.

10) Will “How’s My Waterway” replace ATTAINS?

No, in fact *How’s My Waterway* relies on the regularly updated water data in ATTAINS as its information source. It is an enhancement of ATTAINS that complements its existing functions by providing quicker and easier access to very localized information, thereby helping to serve broader audiences and mobile device users.

11) Where does the water quality information in “How’s My Waterway” come from?

The Clean Water Act requires States, Territories and authorized Tribes (here called States for brevity) to monitor water pollution and report to EPA every two years on the waters they have

evaluated. This process is called assessment. Part of this process is deciding which waters do not meet water quality standards because they are too polluted. These degraded waters are called impaired (polluted enough to require action) and are placed on a State list for future actions to reduce pollution. *How's My Waterway* local information includes whether and when a waterway was assessed, what pollution may exist, and what has been done to improve conditions.

12) Does this include everything that's currently known about water quality?

No, more recent or more detailed water information may exist that is not yet available through EPA databases or other sources. EPA is not authorized to compile water pollution information from all government and private sources. *How's My Waterway* provides the date of the most recent assessment for each assessed waterway. Water quality changes may have occurred since that date. Future versions of *How's My Waterway* may be able to include more types of water information if sufficient funding exists.

13) Are all waters tested for pollution, and if not, then why not?

Although the answer varies from place to place, the majority of waters are not assessed. Many waters remain untested for pollution because of insufficient staff and funding to monitor all waters. Panning across the map in *How's My Waterway* is an easy way to see the relative numbers of unassessed (blue), assessed and polluted (red), and assessed and unpolluted (green) waters in any given area.

14) Is other water information available besides polluted waters and what's being done?

In order to return search results quickly, a limited amount and variety of information can be displayed in *How's My Waterway*. Nevertheless, the 'Related Links' page provides links to other high-interest water sites that have information on beach closures, drinking water, fish advisories, permits and other topics. In the future, retrieving more information within *How's My Waterway* searches may become possible.

15) How can I contact the right government agency about water pollution?

If you wish to send comments to EPA about *How's My Waterway*, please follow the 'contact us' link at the bottom of the web page. If you wish to ask a question or report a water pollution problem, you should directly contact the water quality program for your State. *How's My Waterway* provides links for contacting all state water programs under the 'What You Can Do' button on the 'Related Links' page.