

## Where is the Ordinary High Water Mark of a River?

Chagrin River watershed communities are implementing riparian setbacks to maintain the flood control, erosion control, and water quality protection services offered by stream side areas. These setbacks are measured from the *ordinary high water mark* of the river. The location of the ordinary high water mark is determined in the field by a qualified professional. Organizations such as the Chagrin River Watershed Partners, Inc, the Cuyahoga Soil and Water Conservation District, and the Ohio Department of Natural Resources are available to landowners and communities to delineate the ordinary high water mark on a parcel. However, in considering implementation of riparian setback ordinances, communities and landowners need a general idea of the location of the ordinary high water mark. This handout first defines the ordinary high water mark and then shows the area on photographs from throughout the Chagrin River watershed.

### Definition of the Ordinary High Water Mark

The *ordinary high water mark* is:

*The point on a stream bank to which the presence and action of surface water is so continuous as to leave a distinct mark by erosion; destruction or prevention of woody terrestrial vegetation; predominance of aquatic vegetation; or other easily recognized characteristic.*

The ordinary high water mark defines the bed of a stream and is also referred to as the active channel. CRWP, Cuyahoga SWCD, ODNR and other professionals delineating the ordinary high water mark on a parcel will look for indicators such as an obvious transition zone on the stream bank between:

- ✓ Aquatic vegetation, such as sedges and cattails, and terrestrial vegetation such as perennial grasses and woody shrubs, or
- ✓ Gravel on the stream bed and terrestrial vegetation.

In areas with steep banks, an erosion scour line usually highlights the ordinary high water mark.

### The Ordinary High Water Mark in the Chagrin River Watershed



The ordinary high water mark on this section of the Chagrin is clear at the point where gravel meets terrestrial grasses along the stream bank.

Figure 1: South Chagrin Reservation, Village of Bentleyville



This horizontal line along the bottom of this steep bank shows the ordinary high water mark. On this section of the Chagrin River, active erosion defines the area.

**Figure 2 Todd Field, City of Willoughby Hills**



This ordinary high water mark area highlights a transition between aquatic plants and terrestrial plants.

**Figure 3 Village of Moreland Hills**