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Wetland Buffers

Wetland buffers are areas of land surrounding a wetland boundary, set aside from development. Buffers protect wetlands from the impacts of adjacent land use. Wetlands serve essential ecological functions such as reducing downstream stormwater flow, recharging ground water, improving water quality and providing wildlife habitat. Buffers help wetlands work by filtering storm runoff from surrounding developments, trapping sediment, absorbing nutrients, and attenuating high flows. Buffers provide high quality wildlife habitat areas. Buffers also physically separate wetlands from developed areas in order to lessen noise, light and chemical pollution and other associated disturbances by humans.

The Washington Department of Ecology provides guidance for sizing buffers, in conjunction with the Department of Fish and Wildlife and the Department of Natural Resources, and local jurisdictions regulate them. The jurisdictions specify buffer size according to the quality of the wetland, which is ranked into one of four categories during the wetland delineation process. Some jurisdictions also consider other factors such as the estimated impacts from adjacent land uses, and the presence of threatened or endangered species. The current condition of the buffer may also affect the required buffer size. For example, if the buffer has low species diversity and is only vegetated by pasture grasses, the local jurisdiction may require an installation of native plants and increase the size of the buffer. Buffers typically range from 300' to 50' in width, and Category I wetlands have the largest buffers. Local jurisdictions may reduce required buffer widths through buffer averaging (though the overall area of the buffer must remain the same) or by other mitigating actions that improve the functioning of the buffer.

Due to the interconnectivity between a wetland and the surrounding uplands, impacts to the buffer can damage the ecological and social functions of the wetland. Wildlife that feed in wetlands may also depend on the buffers for shelter. Sometimes, water drains into a wetland from upslope and then percolates into the ground; so polluted stormwater runoff degrades the wetland water quality and ultimately affects the quality of groundwater, which may be used as a source of drinking water.

To protect wetland functions, it's crucial to limit disturbance within buffers. Allowed buffer land uses and permit procedures vary by jurisdiction. Your area may allow some land uses in the buffers, such as existing agriculture, septic drainfields, stormwater facilities, etc. Access roads, slope stabilization and removal of vegetation usually require permits. In general, to maintain buffer quality, there should be no clearing of native vegetation or soil compaction by heavy machinery. No dumping of any kind should be allowed within the buffer, including brush, weeds, and refuse. Because buffers serve to filter out sediments and nutrients flowing into the wetland, burdening the buffers with piles of organic material only makes the buffers less effective. Yard waste and trash piles also damage existing vegetation, limit recruitment of new vegetation in the dumping area, and possibly introduce pollutants and weeds.

Clearing vegetation in buffers frequently leads to stop-work orders and violation notices from the local planning department. Local jurisdictions require that you mitigate impacts to buffers, usually by replanting the cleared buffer areas, and monitoring and maintaining replanted areas, as well as replacing plants that die. Often, a 3-5 year performance bond is required. It can be difficult to reestablish plants after plants have been cleared and the ground compacted; it's better to avoid the problem by fencing off the buffers before construction starts, and installing clearly marked signs and silt fencing.

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