

**NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE**  
**CONSERVATION PRACTICE STANDARD**  
**IRRIGATION SYSTEM, TAILWATER RECOVERY**

(No.)

**CODE 447**

**DEFINITION**

A planned irrigation system in which all facilities utilized for the collection, storage, and transportation of irrigation tailwater and/or rainfall runoff for reuse have been installed.

**PURPOSE**

This practice may be applied as part of a resource management system to achieve one or more of the following purposes:

Conserve irrigation water supplies.

Improve offsite water quality.

Reduce energy use.

**CONDITIONS WHERE PRACTICE APPLIES**

Tailwater recovery systems are suitable for use on lands that are served by a properly designed and installed irrigation system where recoverable irrigation runoff and/or rainfall runoff flows can be anticipated under current or expected management practices.

This standard applies to the planning and functional design of irrigation tailwater recovery systems including, but not limited to, pickup ditches, sumps, collecting basins, pumping plants and pipelines. It does not apply to detailed design criteria or construction specifications for individual structures or components of the recovery system.

**CRITERIA**

**General Criteria Applicable To All Purposes**

The installation and operation of a tailwater recovery system shall comply with all federal, state and local laws, rules and regulations.

Appropriate Alabama NRCS conservation practice standards and specifications shall be used in the

design and construction of facilities needed for a tailwater recovery system. The criteria for the design of components not addressed in an Alabama NRCS Conservation Practice Standard shall be consistent with sound engineering principles.

**Collection Facilities.** Facilities for the collection of irrigation tailwater can be an integral part of irrigation systems covered by Alabama NRCS Conservation Practice Standards, Irrigation System, Surface and Subsurface, Code 443, and Irrigation System, Sprinkler, Code 442. These facilities may include, but are not limited to, ditches, culverts, pipelines, water control and/or grade stabilization structures or other erosion control measures, as needed.

**Storage Facilities.** Facilities are needed to store the collected water until it is redistributed in the irrigation system. Runoff volume and rate, as well as the required level of water control at the point where the tailwater is returned to the irrigation system, should be considered in determining the size of the storage facility.

For systems where tailwater is discharged into a collecting basin or regulating reservoir or into a pipeline having facilities for regulating fluctuating flows (i.e. a float valve), small sumps with frequently cycling pumping plants may be used. For systems unable to regulate flows, tailwater sumps or collection basins shall be made large enough to provide the regulation needed to permit efficient use of the water.

When energy sources for tailwater pump back systems are subject to interruption, safe emergency bypass areas cannot be provided, or tailwater discharges violate local or state regulations, tailwater storage requirements shall, as a minimum, include a volume adequate to store the complete runoff from a single irrigation set.

Conservation practice standards are reviewed periodically and updated if needed. To obtain the current version of this standard, contact your Natural Resources Conservation Service [State Office](#) or visit the [Field Office Technical Guide](#).

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Sumps and collecting basins shall be equipped with inlets designed to protect the side slopes and the collection facilities from erosion. A dike, ditch, or water control structure shall be provided, if required by state law, to limit the entrance of rainfall runoff into the designed inlet. Sediment traps shall be installed as needed.

**Conveyance Facilities.** All tailwater recovery systems require facilities to convey water from the storage facility to a point of entry back into the irrigation system. These facilities may consist of a pumping plant and pipeline to return the water to the upper end of the field, or a gravity outlet having a ditch or pipeline to convey the water to a lower elevation in the irrigation system. Other components or combinations of components may be necessary as determined on a site-specific basis.

The capacity of conveyance facilities shall be determined by an analysis of the expected runoff rate, the planned irrigation collecting basin or regulating reservoir storage capacity, and the anticipated irrigation application. If the return flow is used as an independent irrigation supply rather than as a supplement to the primary irrigation water supply, the rate and volume of flow must be adequate for the method(s) of water application employed.

#### **Additional Criteria Applicable To Improving Water Quality**

**Storage Facilities.** Where additional storage is required to provide adequate retention time for the breakdown of chemicals in the runoff waters, storage facilities shall be sized accordingly. Allowable retention times shall be site specific to the particular chemical used.

Seepage from a storage facility shall be controlled to the extent possible when the storage facility is expected to receive chemical-laden waters. Control may be in the form of natural soil liners, soil additives, commercial liners, or other approved methods.

Where additional storage is required to provide for sediment deposition, storage facilities shall be sized accordingly. Allowable retention times shall be site specific to the particular soil type(s).

#### **Additional Criteria Applicable to Reduce Energy Use**

Provide analysis to demonstrate reduction of energy use from practice implementation.

Reduction of energy use is calculated as average annual or seasonal energy reduction compared to previous operating conditions.

### **CONSIDERATIONS**

#### **Water Quantity**

- Irrigation systems should be designed to limit tailwater volumes to that needed for effective operation. This reduces the need or minimizes the size and capacity of collection, storage, and transportation facilities.
- Where tailwater recovery systems are used to collect rainfall runoff for storage and use as an irrigation water source, the size and capacity of collection and storage facilities will be sized according to expected runoff volumes and rates as well as the expected crop water needs.
- Changes in irrigation water management activities may be necessary to optimize the use of return flows.
- Downstream flows or aquifer recharge volumes dependent on runoff will be reduced and could cause undesirable environmental, social, or economic effects.

#### **Water Quality**

- Effects on surface and groundwater quality by the movement of sediment and soluble and sediment-attached substances should be considered. Chemical-laden water can create a potential hazard to wildlife, especially waterfowl that are drawn to ponded water.
- Nutrient and pest management measures should be planned to limit chemical-laden tailwater as much as practical.
- Protection of system components from storm events and excessive sedimentation should be considered.

#### **Other Considerations**

- This practice may adversely affect cultural resources and must comply with NRCS General Manual 420, Part 401 during planning, installation, and maintenance.
- Effects on the visual quality of water resources should be also considered.

## **PLANS AND SPECIFICATIONS**

Plans and specifications for irrigation tailwater recovery systems shall be prepared for specific field sites in accordance with this standard and shall describe the requirements for applying the practice to achieve its intended purpose.

## **OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE**

An Operation and Maintenance plan specific to the facilities installed shall be prepared for use by the landowner or operator responsible for operation and maintenance. The plan should provide specific instructions for operating and maintaining facilities to ensure they function properly. The plan shall include provisions to address the following, as a minimum:

- Periodic cleaning and re-grading of collection facilities to maintain proper flow lines and functionality.

- Periodic checks and removal of debris as necessary from trash racks and structures to assure proper operation.
- Periodic removal of sediment from traps and/or storage facilities to maintain design capacity and efficiency.
- Inspection or testing of all pipeline and pumping plant components and appurtenances, as applicable.
- Routine maintenance of all mechanical components in accordance with the manufacturer's recommendations.

## **REFERENCES**

General Manual 420, Part 401

Alabama NRCS Conservation Practice Standards

Irrigation System, Sprinkler, Code 442

Irrigation System, Surface and Subsurface,  
Code 443