



Natural Resources Conservation Service

CONSERVATION PRACTICE STANDARD

MULCHING

CODE 484

(ac)

DEFINITION

Applying plant residues or other suitable materials to the land surface.

PURPOSE

This practice is applied to achieve the following purpose(s):

- Improve the efficiency of moisture management
- Reduce irrigation energy used in farming/ranching practices and field operations
- Improve the efficient use of irrigation water
- Prevent excessive bank erosion from streams, shorelines, or water conveyance channels
- Reduce concentrated flow erosion
- Reduce sheet, rill, and wind erosion
- Improve plant productivity and health
- Maintain or increase organic matter content
- Reduce emissions of particulate matter

CONDITIONS WHERE PRACTICE APPLIES

This practice applies to all lands where mulches are needed.

CRITERIA

General Criteria Applicable to All Purposes

The selection of mulching materials will depend primarily on the purpose(s) for the mulch application, site conditions, and material availability. The mulch materials may consist of natural or synthetic materials of sufficient dimension (depth or thickness) and durability to achieve the intended purpose for the required time period.

Prepare the soil surface to achieve the desired purpose.

Apply the mulch material evenly. Use tackifiers, emulsions, pinning, netting, crimping, or other methods of anchoring, if needed, to hold the mulch in place for specified periods.

In cases where furrow erosion may occur due to concentrated flows from mulches(e.g., plastic mulches on beds), take appropriate measures to protect the furrows and the furrow outlets.

Apply manufactured mulches according to the manufacturer's specifications.

Remove synthetic mulches from the field prior to the next crop. Do not incorporate (e.g. disk) synthetic mulches into the soil.

When mulching with wood products such as wood chips, bark, or shavings or other wood materials, apply a minimum 2-inch thickness of particles that remain in place during heavy rainfall or strong wind events, or both if applicable.

The minimum size of mulching material consisting of gravel or other inorganic mulching is 0.75 inches and applied to a minimum depth of 2 inches.

When mulching with cereal grain straw or grass hay, apply at a rate to achieve a minimum 70 percent ground cover. Determine the mulch rate using the current erosion prediction technology for the intended purpose.

Do not apply plant-based mulch materials with a carbon (C) to nitrogen (N) ratio of less than 20:1 to watercourses.

Additional Criteria to Improve the Efficiency of Moisture Management, to Reduce Irrigation Energy Used in Farming/Ranching Practices, and Field Operations or to Improve the Efficient Use of Irrigation Water

Apply mulch materials to cover at least 90 percent of the soil surface to reduce potential evaporation.

Fine textured mulches (e.g., rice hulls) which allow less oxygen penetration than coarser materials should be no thicker than 2 inches

Additional Criteria to Improve Plant Productivity and Health

When establishing vegetative cover, apply mulch at a rate that achieves a minimum of 70 percent ground cover to provide protection from erosion and runoff and yet allow adequate light and air penetration to the seedbed to ensure proper germination and emergence.

Additional Criteria to Increase Organic Matter Content

Use plant-based mulching materials of suitable quantity and quality to add organic matter, provide food and shelter for soil biota, and protect the soil surface from raindrop impact and crusting, while allowing for adequate soil aeration.

An evaluation of the system using the current approved soil conditioning index (SCI) procedure results in zero or higher.

CONSIDERATIONS

Evaluate the effects of mulching on evaporation, infiltration, and runoff. Mulch material may affect microbial activity in the soil surface, increase infiltration, and decrease runoff, erosion, and evaporation. The temperature of the surface runoff may also be lowered.

Mulch materials with low permeability may adversely affect the water needs of plants.

Avoid excessively thick or tightly packed mulches that can result in soggy anaerobic conditions at the soil surface during wet weather, or prevent rainfall or overhead irrigation from reaching the soil during times of moisture deficit.

Organic materials with C:N ratios of less than 15:1 will release nitrate-nitrogen that could cause water quality impairments. Avoid placing mulch with C:N less than 15:1 to an area of designed flow in watercourses or to an area where the mulch may be transported by surface runoff to a waterway.

Finely divided plant residues (e.g., sawdust) and those rich in soluble carbohydrates (e.g., fresh green-chopped sorghum-sudangrass, corn, or other grasses) that have a C:N ratio greater than 30 can tie up soil N and necessitate supplemental N applications on crops. Coarser materials such as grain straw and chipped brush usually do not reduce crop-available soil N levels unless and until they are incorporated into the soil by tillage or cultivation.

If using municipal greenwaste as mulch, be selective of the source and consider the amount of trash, weed seeds, or non-biodegradable material in the product.

Consider the potential impacts of plastic mulching on the environment and plan for proper disposal methods after its functional use has expired.

Mulching may also provide habitat for beneficial organisms and provide pest suppression.

In attempting to provide habitat for ground beetles, spiders, and other predators of weed seeds and crop pests, use mulch of sufficient ground cover and suitable thickness and texture for the target species. Avoid excessively thick or tightly packed mulches, which can interfere with the movement of ground beetles and other beneficial organisms, and may increase the incidence of crop pests and diseases. Consider mulching crops only if the selected mulching materials, and rates of application do not contribute to pest problems.

During the period when weed seed predation is desired and predators are most active, avoid pesticide applications or pesticide exposures that could adversely affect weed seed consumers.

Low permeability mulches (e.g., plastic) may increase concentrated flow and erosion on unmulched areas.

Light-reflecting mulches such as white or aluminized plastic film or bright straw can repel some pests.

Consider potential beneficial or detrimental effects of mulching materials on the biotic community surrounding the crop, including beneficial soil micro- and macro-organisms, as well as plant pathogens and plant pests. These effects are specific to site, mulch, and crop, and may include enhanced soil microbial activity, increased or reduced levels of crop diseases, and toxic (allelopathic) activity against the crop, weeds, or other beneficial or pest organisms.

Keep mulch 3 to 6 inches away from plant stems and crowns to prevent disease and pest problems. Additional weed control may be needed around the plant base area.

Deep mulch provides nesting habitat for ground-burrowing rodents that can chew extensively on tree trunks and tree roots. Light mulch applied after the first cold weather may prevent rodents from nesting.

Some mulch material may adversely affect aquatic environments through changes in water chemistry or as waterborne debris. Consider placing mulch in locations that minimize these risks.

For all organic or transitioning to organic operations, follow all National Organic Program (NOP) rules.

PLANS AND SPECIFICATIONS

Prepare specifications for each site and purpose on the approved implementation requirements documentation. Documentation must include—

- Purpose of the mulch.
- Type of mulch material used.
- Percent cover or thickness of mulch material, as applicable.
- Timing of application.
- Site preparation.
- Listing of netting, tackifiers, or method of anchoring.
- Operation and maintenance.

OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE

Periodically inspect the mulched areas and reinstall mulch or repair as needed to accomplish the intended purpose.

Evaluate the effectiveness of the mulch (application, amount of cover provided, durability, etc.) and adjust the management or type of mulch to better meet the intended purpose(s).

Remove or incorporate mulch materials will be consistent with the intended purpose and site conditions.

Do not operate equipment near the mulched site that would compromise the intended purpose of the mulch.

Prevent or repair any fire damage to the mulch material.

Properly collect and dispose of synthetic mulch material after intended use.

Monitor and control undesirable weeds in mulched areas.

REFERENCES

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