

**NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE  
CONSERVATION PRACTICE STANDARD**

**IRRIGATION SYSTEM, SPRINKLER, (NUMBER AND ACRE)**

**Code 442**

**DEFINITION**

An irrigation system in which all necessary equipment and facilities are installed for efficiently applying water by means of nozzles operated under pressure.

**PURPOSE**

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

- Efficiently and uniformly apply irrigation water to maintain adequate soil water for optimum plant growth without causing excessive water loss, erosion, or water quality impairment.
- For climate control and/or modification.
- Apply chemicals, nutrients, and/or waste water.

**CONDITIONS WHERE PRACTICE APPLIES**

The sprinkler method of water application is suited to most crops, irrigable lands, and climatic conditions where irrigated agriculture is feasible. Areas must be suitable for irrigation with water of suitable quality for the purpose intended.

This standard applies to the planning and design of the overall sprinkler irrigation water distribution and/or wastewater disposal system. This standard pertains to the planning and functional design of all sprinkler components except for special structures such as permanently installed main and lateral pipelines or pumping plants. Other components shall meet appropriate NRCS Conservation Practice

Standards.

In addition to conventional impact and spray systems, this standard applies to newer types of systems such as Low Energy Precision Application, (LEPA), Low Elevation (1.0 to 2.5 feet) Spray Application (LESA), Mid-Elevation (2.5 to 5.0 feet) Spray Application (MESA), and similar systems. This standard also covers criteria specific to Low Pressure In-Canopy (LPIC) systems as applicable based on the crop being irrigated. LESA and MESA systems could also be LPIC systems and would need to meet LPIC criteria. It does not include criteria for mini- or micro-sprinkler systems. These are covered by NRCS Conservation Practice Standard 441 – Irrigation System, Microirrigation.

LEPA sprinkler systems are only applicable on row crops.

The withdrawal of water from a stream, surface impoundment, or underground aquifer for irrigation requires a permit issued under Section 567 Chapter 52 Iowa Administrative Code.

**CRITERIA**

**General Criteria Applicable to All Purposes**

The criteria for the design of components not addressed in NRCS practice standards shall be consistent with sound engineering principles.

Each irrigation system must be designed as an integral part of an overall plan of conservation land use and treatment for the irrigated area that is based on the capabilities of the land and the needs of the operator.

Sprinkler irrigation system selection shall be based on a site evaluation and expected operating conditions. The soils and topography shall be suitable for irrigation for the proposed crops. An adequate supply of good quality water must be available for practical irrigation of the crops to be grown.

**Depth of Application.** Net depth of application shall be based on soil available water capacity in the crop root zone, or a lesser amount consistent with the land user's irrigation water management plan. The gross depth shall be determined by using field application efficiencies consistent with the conservation of water resources.

**Capacity.** The sprinkler irrigation system shall have adequate capacity to meet the intended purpose.

**Main Lines.** The design of main lines, submains, and supply lines shall insure that the quantities of water required are conveyed to all operating lateral lines at required pressure. For detailed criteria, see NRCS Conservation Practice Standard 430 – Irrigation Pipeline.

**Pump and Power Unit.** Where required, the pump and power unit shall be adequate to operate the sprinkler system efficiently at required capacity and total dynamic head. For detailed criteria, see NRCS Conservation Practice Standard 533 – Pumping Plant.

#### **Additional Criteria Applicable to Applying Water Efficiently with Center Pivot or Linear-Move Sprinkler Systems**

**Capacity.** Sprinkler irrigation systems shall have either (1) a design capacity adequate to meet water demands of all

crops to be irrigated in the design area, or (2) adequate capacity to meet requirements of several selected irrigations during critical crop growth periods when less than full irrigation is planned. In computing capacity requirements, allowance must be made for reasonable water losses during application.

**Design Application Rate.** For center pivot sprinkler systems, application rate is dependent on sprinkler head type, width of spray pattern, system capacity, and distance from the pivot point and speed of revolution. Peak application rates near the end of the center pivot may exceed soil intake rate. Light, frequent applications can reduce runoff problems; however, the potential exists for increased losses from soil surface evaporation. Nozzle offsets or booms can also be used to reduce peak application rates. If additional storage is required, surface basin storage such as furrow dikes, dammer dikes, or implanted reservoirs or farming practices such as conservation tillage, in-furrow chiseling, and/or residue management shall be utilized.

**Distribution Patterns, Nozzle Spacing, and Height.** A combination of sprinkler spacing, nozzle size, and operating pressure that most nearly provide the design application rate and distribution shall be selected.

Uniformity coefficient (Cu) data (or distribution uniformity (DU)) shall be used in selecting sprinkler spacing, nozzle size, and operating pressure. Definitions of each of these uniformity values can be found in the National Engineering Handbook, Part 652, Irrigation Guide.

For a LEPA system, nozzle discharge Cu shall not be less than 94%. For all other systems, Cu shall not be less than 85% (76% DU).

In the absence of Cu data, sprinkler performance tables provided by manufacturers shall be used in selecting

nozzle size, operating pressure, and wetted diameter for the required sprinkler discharge. Low-pressure spray nozzle discharge shall be at uniform heights along the length of the tower. Nozzle spacing along lateral lines shall not exceed 40% of the effective wetted diameter. The effective wetted diameter shall be determined from manufacturer's tables/information and nozzle height.

For LEPA systems, nozzle spacing shall not be greater than two times the row spacing of the crop. Water shall be discharged through a drag sock or hose on the ground surface, or through a bubble nozzle at uniform heights not to exceed 18 inches.

LESA and MESA systems that discharge water in the crop canopy for a considerable length of time during the growing season shall also meet the criteria of a LPIC system as defined in this standard.

**Row Arrangement.** LEPA systems shall have row patterns that match the lateral line movement (i.e. circular for center pivots). Water shall not be applied in the tower wheel track of a LEPA system.

**Slope.** Sprinkler irrigation systems are generally adapted to a wide range of slope conditions. Application rates on sloping land should be set so that surface water redistribution is minimized. If this is not practical, additional measures such as furrow diking, dammer diking, in-furrow chiseling, conservation tillage and/or residue management shall be applied where needed.

The slope for a LEPA system shall not exceed 1.0 percent on more than 50 percent of the field. LEPA systems shall employ some method of providing surface basin storage such as furrow dikes, dammer dikes, or implanted reservoirs.

**Irrigation Water Management.** NRCS Conservation Practice Standard 449 – Irrigation Water Management shall be implemented with this standard.

### **Additional Criteria Applicable to Applying Water Efficiently with a Center Pivot or Linear-Move Sprinkler with Low Pressure In-Canopy (LPIC) System**

**Distribution Patterns, Nozzle Spacing, and Height.** Water distribution is greatly affected by nozzle spacing and height for LPIC systems. In general, closer spaced nozzles will yield a higher uniformity. In-canopy heights should be set such that areas of high leaf concentration are avoided (i.e. corn near the ear height (approximately 4 feet)). Local experience with applicable crops should be used as a guide for establishing appropriate nozzle spacing and height in keeping with this standard.

**Slope.** The slope for a LPIC system shall not exceed 3.0 percent on more than 50 percent of the field. LPIC systems on row crops shall utilize surface basin storage such as furrow dikes, dammer dikes, or implanted reservoirs or farming practices such as conservation tillage, in-furrow chiseling, and/or residue management to control translocation of applied irrigation water where needed.

**Irrigation Water Management.** NRCS Conservation Practice Standard 449 – Irrigation Water Management shall be implemented with this standard.

### **Additional Criteria Applicable to Applying Water Efficiently with Fixed-Solid-set, Big Gun, and Periodic Move Sprinkler Systems**

**Capacity.** Sprinkler irrigation systems shall have either (1) a design capacity adequate to meet water demands of all crops to be irrigated in the design area, or (2) adequate capacity to meet requirements of several selected water applications during critical crop growth periods when less than full irrigation is planned. In computing capacity

requirements, allowance must be made for reasonable water losses during application.

**Design Application Rate.** The design application rate shall be within a range established by the minimum practical application rate under local climatic conditions, and the maximum application rate consistent with soil intake rate, slope, and conservation practices used on the land. If two or more sets of conditions exist in the design area, the lowest maximum application rate for areas of significant size shall apply.

**Lateral Lines.** Unless pressure reducers/regulators are installed at each outlet or other pressure compensating or flow control devices are used, lateral lines shall be designed so that the total pressure variation, resulting from friction head and elevation differential, does not exceed 20 percent of the design operating pressure of the sprinklers.

**Distribution Patterns and Spacing.** A combination of sprinkler spacing, nozzle size, and operating pressure that most nearly provide the design application rate and distribution shall be selected.

If available, uniformity coefficient (Cu) data (or distribution uniformity (DU)) shall be used in selecting sprinkler spacing, nozzle size, and operating pressure. Definitions of each of these uniformity values can be found in the National Engineering Handbook, Part 652, Irrigation Guide. Cu shall not be less than the following:

- 75 % (60% DU) for deep-rooted (4 feet or more) field and forage crops where fertilizers and pesticides are not applied through the system.
- 85 % (76% DU) for high-value or shallow-rooted crops and for any crop where fertilizer or pesticides are applied through the system.

In the absence of Cu data, maximum lateral and nozzle spacing shall comply with the following criteria:

1. For low (2-35 pounds/square inch (psi))-, moderate (36-50 psi)-, and medium (51-75 psi)-pressure sprinkler nozzles, the spacing along lateral lines shall not exceed 50 percent of the wetted diameter, as given in the manufacturer's performance tables, when the sprinkler is operating under design pressure. The spacing of laterals along the main line shall not exceed 65 percent of this wetted diameter. If winds that can affect the distribution pattern are likely during critical crop growth periods, spacing should be reduced to 60 percent for average velocities of 1 to 5 mph, to 50 percent for average velocities of 6 to 10 mph, and to 45 percent for average velocities greater than 10 mph.
2. For high-pressure and big gun type sprinklers (>75 psi), the maximum distance (diagonal) between two sprinklers on adjacent lateral lines shall not exceed two-thirds of the wetted diameter under favorable operating conditions. If winds that can affect the distribution pattern are likely during critical crop growth periods, the diagonal spacing should be reduced to 50 percent of the wetted diameter for average velocities of 1 to 10 mph and to 30 percent for average velocities greater than 10 mph.

**Slope.** Sprinkler irrigation systems are generally adapted to a wide range of slope conditions. Application rates on sloping land should be set so that surface water redistribution is minimized. If this is not practical, additional measures such as furrow dikes, dammer dikes, or implanted reservoirs or farming practices such as conservation tillage, in-furrow chiseling, and/or residue management shall be applied where needed.

**Risers.** Except for under-tree operation, riser pipes used in lateral lines shall be high enough to prevent interference with the distribution pattern when the tallest crop is irrigated. Riser heights shall not be less than shown below:

Sprinkler discharge (gallons/minute)	Riser length (inches)
Less than 10	6
10-25	9
25-50	12
50-120	18
More than 120	36

**Irrigation Water Management.** NRCS Conservation Practice Standard 449 – Irrigation Water Management shall be implemented with this standard.

#### **Additional Criteria Applicable to Climate Control and/or Modification**

Sprinkler irrigation systems designed to provide temperature or frost control shall be in accordance with state and local guidelines and criteria.

**Capacity.** For temperature control, the sprinkler irrigation system shall have sufficient capacity to satisfy the evaporative demand on a minute-by-minute basis throughout the peak use period.

For frost protection, the system shall be capable of applying the necessary rate, based on the minimum temperature, maximum anticipated wind speed and relative humidity, in a uniform manner. The capacity shall be sufficient to supply the demand for the entire crop being protected.

**Irrigation Water Management.** NRCS Conservation Practice Standard 449 – Irrigation Water Management shall be implemented with this standard.

#### **Additional Criteria Applicable to Chemical, Nutrient and/or Waste Water Application**

The installation and operation of a sprinkler irrigation system for the purpose of chemical and/or nutrient application (chemigation) shall comply with all federal, state and local laws, rules and regulations. This includes backflow and anti-siphon prevention measures. Additionally, surface waters shall also be protected from direct application.

**Design Application Rate.** For systems operated with application rates that exceed soil intake, measures shall be installed to prevent runoff. These may include but are not limited to nozzle offsets or booms, furrow dikes, dammer dikes or implanted reservoirs or farming practices such as conservation tillage, in-furrow chiseling and/or residue management.

**Coefficient of Uniformity.** If available, uniformity coefficient (Cu) data (or distribution uniformity (DU)) shall be used in selecting sprinkler spacing, nozzle size, and operating pressure. Definitions of each of these uniformity values can be found in the National Engineering Handbook, Part 652, Irrigation Guide. Cu shall not be less than 85% (76% DU) for all systems through which fertilizer or pesticides are applied.

If Cu data is not available, distribution patterns and spacing requirements shall be in keeping with the appropriate specific criteria of this standard.

**Nutrient and Pest Management.** Chemicals, fertilizers and liquid manure shall be applied in accordance with appropriate NRCS Practice Standards: 590 – Nutrient Management, 595 – Pest Management, 633 – Waste Utilization and/or 634 – Manure Transfer. Chemical and/or nutrient application amounts shall not exceed these standards.

## CONSIDERATIONS

When planning this practice the following items should be considered, where applicable:

For LESA and MESA systems, row arrangement, nozzle spacing and height all impact Cu. System design and field management should complement each other to yield the highest Cu. In general, circular rows for center pivot systems and straight rows for linear move systems provide higher uniformity coefficients.

Some aspects of nonuniformity tend to average out throughout the irrigation season while others tend to concentrate. Factors that tend to average out during the irrigation season are climatic conditions and uneven travel speed for start/stop systems. Factors that tend to concentrate during the irrigation season are nozzle discharge variances due to pressure or elevation differences, surface movement of water, and poor water distribution around field boundaries.

Consider the effects of a center pivot's end gun operation on Cu. A large end gun may reduce the average Cu by 1.0 percent for each 1.0 percent of the area covered past the main system hardware.

Consider the on-off effects of corner arm units and end guns attached to a center pivot system on overall sprinkler performance.

Conservation tillage and/or residue management should be utilized as necessary to limit surface redistribution of water. Soil surface storage basins, furrow dikes, dammer dikes or implanted reservoirs may also be necessary to reduce surface water movement. The effects of these practices may diminish over the irrigation season.

If surface water redistribution is a concern with center pivot or linear-move systems, the system speed should generally be increased. When the speed is increased, subsequent irrigation cycles will need to

be more frequent to meet planned water application. However, the application depth should be large enough to prevent losing a large percentage of water to soil and canopy evaporation.

The velocity of prevailing winds and other physical conditions should be considered when planning a sprinkler system.

Where used, drop tubes should be installed alternately on both sides of the mainline and have a flexible joint between the gooseneck pipes and the application device. Drops should be weighted and/or secured in windy areas.

Consider different sprinkler application depths and application rates with hand move and center pivot systems. With hand move systems, the application rates more nearly match the soil infiltration rate so that large irrigations can be applied and number of hand moves reduced. With an automated system such as a center pivot, hand labor is not a major consideration and small applications at high rates are the norm.

Fertilizer and chemical application amounts may need adjustment from prior application methods and rates, due to precise applications possible with some sprinkler irrigation systems.

Management of sprinkler irrigation systems for reduced irrigation may include utilizing soil water stored in the root zone during critical crop growth stages.

Deflection of spans on center pivots and linear-move systems is common when the lateral is loaded (filled with water). This should be considered when determining nozzle heights. Wheel track depth will also affect nozzle height.

On center pivot or linear move systems, nozzles may need to be diverted away from wheel tracks to avoid rutting.

Low-pressure systems (35 pounds/square inch or less) are sensitive to small changes in nozzle pressure. Consider using pressure regulators on all low-

pressure systems where elevation differences, pumping depth variations, or end gun/corner arm operation can significantly change nozzle pressure. Also consider installing a pressure gauges at the end of the sprinkler system to ensure adequate pressure throughout.

Consider the systems effects on the water budget, especially the volume and rate of runoff, infiltration, evaporation, transpiration, deep percolation, and ground water recharge.

Consider the systems effects on erosion and movement of sediment, and soluble and sediment-attached substances carried by runoff.

**CONSIDER THE SYSTEMS EFFECTS OF SOIL WATER IN CONTROLLING THE SALINITY OF SOILS, SOIL WATER OR DOWNSTREAM WATER QUALITY INCLUDING SUBSURFACE DRAINS.**

**PLANS AND SPECIFICATIONS**

Plans and specifications for constructing irrigation sprinkler systems shall be in keeping with this standard and shall describe the requirements for properly installing the practice to achieve its intended purpose.

**OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE**

An operation and maintenance plan must be prepared for use by the owner or others responsible for operating the system. The plan should provide specific instructions for operating and maintaining the system to insure that it functions properly. It should also provide for periodic inspections and prompt repair or replacement of damaged components. The plan, as a minimum, shall include provisions to address the following:

- Periodic checks and removal of debris and sediment as necessary from nozzles to assure proper operation.
- Inspection or testing of all pipeline and pumping plant components and appurtenances, as applicable.
- Regular testing of pressures and flow rates to assure proper operation.
- Periodic checks of all nozzles and spray heads for proper operation and wear.
- Routine maintenance of all mechanical components in accordance with the manufacturer's recommendations.
- Prior to retrofitting any electrically powered irrigation equipment, electrical service must be disconnected and the absence of stray electrical current verified.