

**NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE**  
**CONSERVATION PRACTICE STANDARD**

**CONTOUR FARMING**

(Ac.)  
**CODE 330**

**DEFINITION**

Tillage, planting, and other farming operations performed on or near the contour of the field slope.

**PURPOSES**

- To reduce sheet and rill erosion.
- To reduce transport of sediment and other water-borne contaminants.

**CONDITIONS WHERE PRACTICE APPLIES**

This practice applies on sloping land where crops are grown.

Contour farming is most effective on slopes between 2 and 10 percent. This practice will be less effective in achieving the stated purpose(s) on slopes exceeding 10 percent and in areas with 10-year-frequency, single storm EI values greater than 140. *The Contour Farming (330) Conservation Practice Specification includes EI<sub>10</sub> values for the Pacific Islands Area.* The practice is not well suited to rolling topography having a high degree of slope irregularity because of the difficulty meeting row grade criteria.

**CRITERIA**

**General Criteria Applicable to All Purposes**

**Minimum Row Grade.** Row grades for soils with slow to very slow infiltration rates (soil hydrologic groups C or D), or for crops sensitive to ponded water conditions for periods of less than 48 hours, shall be designed with positive row drainage of not less than 0.2 percent on slopes where

ponding is a concern.

**Maximum Row Grade.** The row grade shall be aligned as closely as possible to the contour to achieve the greatest erosion reduction. The maximum grade of rows shall not exceed 2 percent or one half of the up and down hill slope percent used for erosion prediction, whichever is less. Up to 3 percent row grade may be permitted within 150 feet of the approach to a Grassed Waterway (412), Field Border (386) or other stable outlet.

Headlands or end rows that are steeper than the maximum row grade criteria stated above shall have a cover-management condition no greater than 3 or established to permanent field borders. (Cover-Management Conditions are described in Chapter 6, Predicting Soil Erosion by Water, A Guide to Conservation Planning with the Revised Universal Soil Loss Equation (RUSLE). 1997. USDA Agricultural Research Service, Agricultural Handbook No. 703]. Table 6-4.

*Following are descriptions of cropland cover-management conditions used in RUSLE for estimating P-factor values.*

*C2. Hay, (moderately dense cover)—Mixture of grass and legume just before cutting.*

*C3. Heavy (dense) cover or very rough soil, or both—Ground cover for this is about 75—95%. Roughness is like left by a high-clearance moldboard plow on a heavy textured soil. Roughness appears 7 inches or more deep.*

*C4. Moderate cover or rough, or both—  
Ground cover for this is about 40-60%.  
Roughness is like that left by a moldboard  
plow in a medium-textured soil. Roughness  
appears 4-6 inches deep.*

When the row grade reaches the maximum allowable design grade, a new baseline shall be established up or down slope from the last contour line and used for layout of the next contour pattern. All tillage and planting operations will follow the contour line established.

**Minimum Ridge Height.** The ridge height shall be designed to reduce soil erosion compared to that of rows oriented up and down the slope. As a minimum, this practice shall be designed to achieve a 0.5-2 inch ridge height during the period of the rotation that is most vulnerable to soil erosion. Ridge height design will be determined using on site conditions and current erosion prediction technology approved for use.

The minimum ridge height criteria is not required for close-grown crops, such as small grains, when runoff is reduced compared to that of rows planted up and down the slope. As a minimum, plant height shall be at least 6 inches high and the spacing between plants within the row shall not be greater than 2 inches.

The minimum ridge height criteria is not required where the practice Residue and Tillage Management, No Till/Strip Till/Direct Seed (329) is used on the contour if at least 50 percent surface residue is present between the rows after planting.

**Critical Slope Length.** A contour farming layout shall not occur on a hill slope that is longer than the critical slope length, unless supported by other practices (e.g., Terrace (600), Diversion (362)) that either reduce slope length below the critical length or reduce overland flow velocities (Vegetative Barriers (601)). Increasing residue cover and roughness will change the vegetative cover-management conditions and decrease overland flow velocities.

Increasing roughness alone is not sufficient to reduce the critical slope length.

The computation of critical slope length shall be determined using approved erosion prediction technology.

**Stable Outlets.** All runoff from contouring shall be delivered to stable outlets, such as Grassed Waterway (412), Field Border (386), Water and Sediment Control Basin (638), or Underground Outlet (620) for Terrace (600) and Diversion (362).

## CONSIDERATIONS

Prior to design and layout, obstruction removal and changes in field boundaries or shape should be considered, where feasible, to improve the effectiveness of the practice and the ease of performing farming operations.

If using Residue and Tillage Management, Ridge Till (346) on the contour, avoid crossing over ridged rows at correction areas. Consider sod turn strips if correction areas are unavoidable.

Ridge height may vary throughout the year as a result of tillage, planting, some harvest operations, hilling, row cultivation, and weathering. Use of the variable ridge height may be needed in some areas.

The width of correction areas, and the distance between baselines, should be adjusted for equipment operation widths.

Grassed Waterway (412), Water and Sediment Control Basin (638), Underground Outlet (620), or other suitable practices should be used to protect areas of existing or potential concentrated flow erosion.

There are several factors that impact the effectiveness of contour farming to reduce soil erosion. These factors include: 10-year storm  $EI_{10}$  value, ridge height, furrow grade, slope steepness, soil hydrologic group, cover and roughness, and the critical slope length. Cover and roughness, row grade, and ridge height can be influenced by

management and provide more or less benefit depending on design.

Contour Farming (330) may need to be used in combination with other conservation practices to meet the goals of the conservation management system.

## **PLANS AND SPECIFICATIONS**

Specifications for establishment and operation of this practice shall be prepared for each treatment unit according to the Criteria, Considerations, and Operation and Maintenance described in this standard *and guidance in the Conservation Practice Specification*. The site specifications shall be recorded using approved specification sheets, job sheets, narrative statements in the conservation plan, or other acceptable documentation.

## **OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE**

Perform all tillage and planting operations parallel to contour baselines or *the practices* Terrace (600), Diversion (362), or Contour Buffer Strips (332) boundaries where these practices are used, provided the applicable row grade criteria are met.

Where or *the practices* Terrace (600), Diversion (362), or Contour Buffer Strips (332) are not present, maintain contour markers on grades that, when followed during establishment of each crop, will maintain crop rows at designed grades. Contour markers may be field boundaries, a crop row left untilled near or on an original contour baseline, or other readily identifiable, continuous, lasting marker. All tillage and planting operations shall be parallel to the established marker. If a marker is lost, re-establish a contour baseline within the applicable criteria set forth by this standard prior to seedbed preparation for the next crop.

Farming operations should begin on the contour baselines and proceed both up and down the slope in a parallel pattern until patterns meet. Where field operations begin to converge between two non-parallel

contour baselines, establish a correction area that is either permanently in sod, established to an annual close-grown crop, or is in cover-management condition 3.

Where contour row curvature becomes too sharp to keep machinery aligned with rows during field operations, establish sod turn strips on sharp ridge points or other odd areas as needed.

Renovate Field Border (386) as needed to maintain at least 65 percent ground cover. Maintain adequate field border width to allow farm implements room to turn.