

**NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE  
CONSERVATION PRACTICE STANDARD**

**CONTOUR FARMING**

(Ac.)

**CODE 330**

**DEFINITION**

Using ridges and furrows formed by tillage, planting and other farming operations to change the direction of runoff from directly downslope to around the hillslope.

**PURPOSE**

This practice is applied to achieve one or more of the following:

- ◆ Reduce sheet and rill erosion.
- ◆ Reduce transport of sediment, other solids and the contaminants attached to them.
- ◆ Increase water infiltration

**CONDITIONS WHERE PRACTICE APPLIES**

This practice applies on sloping land where annual crops are grown. For orchards, vineyards and nut crops use the practice Contour Orchard and Other Fruit Areas, code 331.

**CRITERIA**

**General Criteria Applicable to All Purposes**

**Minimum Row Grade.**

Row grades for soil hydrologic groups C or D or for crops sensitive to less than 48 hours of ponded water shall be designed with positive row drainage of not less than 0.5 percent.

**Maximum Row Grade.**

The row grade guidelines shall be aligned as closely as possible to the contour to achieve the greatest erosion reduction. The maximum grade of the guidelines shall not exceed the

lesser of 2 percent or one half of the up and down hill slope percent used for erosion prediction. Up to 3 percent row grade may be permitted within 150 feet of the approach to a grassed waterway, field border strip, or other stable outlet.

When row grades reach the lesser of 10 percent or one half the field slope, a new guideline will be established up or down the slope from the last contour line and used for layout the next contour pattern.

**Minimum Ridge Height.**

- **Row spacing greater than 10 inches.** The minimum ridge height shall be 2 inches during the period of the rotation that is most vulnerable to sheet and rill erosion. Ridge height will be determined using the current approved erosion prediction technology.
- **Row spacing 10 inches or less.** The minimum ridge height shall be one inch for close-grown crops, such as small grains. Plant height shall be at least 6 inches high and the spacing between plants within the row shall not be greater than 2 inches during the time most vulnerable to sheet and rill erosion.

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

**Stable Outlets.** Surface flow from contoured fields shall be delivered to stable outlets. Where row length in any one direction exceeds 500 feet, ridge height and row grades will need

to be designed to ensure water flows to a stable outlet.

### **Additional Criteria to Increase Water Infiltration**

**Row Grade.** The maximum row grade shall not exceed 0.2%.

### **CONSIDERATIONS**

**General.** Several factors influence the effectiveness of contour farming to reduce soil erosion. These factors include: 10-year, 24-hour rainfall in inches; ridge height; row grade; slope steepness; soil hydrologic group; cover and roughness; and 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 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, 24-hour rainfall of about 6.5 inches. The practice is not well suited to rolling topography having a high degree of slope irregularity because of the difficulty meeting row grade criteria.

This practice is most effective on slopes between 100 and 400 feet long. On slopes longer than 400 feet, the volume and velocity of overland flow exceeds the capacity of the contour ridges to contain them. Increasing residue cover and roughness will change the vegetative cover-management conditions and decrease overland flow velocities, thus increasing the slope length at which this practice is effective. Increasing roughness alone is not sufficient to produce this effect.

The closer the row grade is to the true contour, the greater will be the erosion reduction.

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.

When the intersection of crop rows with the field edge is not perpendicular, a Field Border (code 386) may be needed to allow farm implements room to turn.

If using Residue and Tillage Management, Ridge Till on the contour, avoid crossing over ridged rows at correction areas because this will destroy the effectiveness of the ridges. Sod turn strips may be established if correction areas are unavoidable.

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

**Ridge Height.** Ridge height is created by the operation of tillage and planting equipment. The greater the ridge height, the more effective the operation is in slowing overland flow. The RUSLE2 Operations database contains the ridge height value for each field operation.

**Stable Outlets.** Grassed waterways, water and sediment control basins, underground outlets, or other suitable practices should be used to protect areas of existing or potential concentrated flow erosion.

### **PLANS AND SPECIFICATIONS**

Specifications for establishment and operation of this practice shall be prepared for each field according to the Criteria, Considerations, and Operation and Maintenance described in this standard. The plans shall include, as a minimum:

- Percent land slope used for conservation planning;
- The minimum and maximum allowable row grades for the contour system;
- A sketch map or photograph of the field showing:
  - ◇ the approximate location of the baselines used to establish the system;
  - ◇ the location of stable outlets for the system

Specifications shall be recorded using approved specification sheets, job sheets, narrative statements in the conservation plan, or other acceptable documentation.

Sheet and rill erosion reduction of the planned system shall be determined and documented using the current erosion prediction technology.

## OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE

Perform all tillage and planting operations parallel to contour baselines or terraces, diversions, or contour buffer strip boundaries where these practices are used, provided the applicable row grade criteria are met.

Where terraces, diversions, or contour buffer strips 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 either is permanently in sod, established to an annual close-grown crop.

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.

## REFERENCES

Foster, G.R. Revised Universal Soil Loss Equation, Version 2 (RUSLE2) Science Documentation (In Draft). USDA-ARS, Washington, DC. 2005.

Renard, K.G., G.R. Foster, G.A. Weesies, D.K. McCool, and D.C. Yoder, coordinators. 1997. Predicting soil erosion by water: A guide to conservation planning with the Revised Universal Soil Loss Equation (RUSLE). U.S. Department of Agriculture, Agriculture Handbook 703.

DRAFT