

**NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE
CONSERVATION PRACTICE STANDARD**

GRASSED WATERWAY

(Ac.)

CODE 412

DEFINITION

A shaped or graded channel that is established with suitable vegetation to carry surface water at a non-erosive velocity to a stable outlet.

PURPOSE

- To convey runoff from terraces, diversions, or other water concentrations without causing erosion or flooding.
- To reduce gully erosion.
- To protect/improve water quality.

CONDITIONS WHERE PRACTICE APPLIES

In areas where added water conveyance capacity and vegetative protection are needed to control erosion resulting from concentrated runoff.

CRITERIA

General Criteria Applicable to All Purposes

Plan, design, and construct grassed waterways to comply with all Federal, State, and local laws and regulations.

Capacity. The minimum capacity shall convey the peak runoff expected from the 10-year frequency, 24-hour duration storm. Capacity shall be increased as needed to account for potential volume of sediment expected to accumulate in the waterway between planned maintenance activities. When the waterway slope is less than 1 percent, out-of-bank flow may be permitted if such flow will not cause excessive erosion. At a minimum, the design capacity shall remove the water before crops

are damaged.

Stability. Determine the minimum depth and width requirements for stability of the grassed waterway using the procedures in the NRCS National Engineering Handbook, Part 650, Engineering Field Handbook, Chapter 7, Grassed Waterways; Agricultural Research Service (ARS) Agriculture Handbook 667, Stability Design of Grass-Lined Open Channels; or other equivalent method.

When used as an outlet for other conservation practices, establish a stable waterway prior to constructing the other practices.

Width. Keep the bottom width of trapezoidal waterways less than 100 feet unless multiple or divided waterways or other means are provided to control meandering of low flows. Design the waterway width to accommodate the maintenance and tillage/harvesting equipment crossing it.

Side slopes. Keep the side slopes flatter than or equal to a ratio of two horizontal to one vertical. Design the waterway side slopes to accommodate the maintenance and tillage/harvesting equipment crossing it.

Depth. The capacity of the waterway must be large enough so that the water surface of the waterway is below the water surface of the tributary channel, terrace, or diversion that flows into the waterway at design flow.

Provide freeboard above the designed depth when flow must be contained to prevent damage. Provide freeboard above the designed depth when the vegetation has the maximum expected retardance.

Drainage. When needed to help or keep vegetation established on sites having

Conservation practice standards are reviewed periodically, and updated if needed. To obtain the current version of this standard, contact the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

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prolonged flows, high water tables, or seepage problems, include Subsurface Drains (606), Underground Outlets (620), Lined Waterway or Outlet (468), stone center waterways or other suitable measures in waterway designs.

Water tolerant vegetation may be an alternative on some wet sites.

Outlets. Provide a stable outlet with adequate capacity. The outlet can be another vegetated channel, an earthen ditch, a grade-stabilization structure, filter strip or other suitable outlet.

Waterways shall be designed and constructed on a constant slope for a minimum of 300 ft. form the outlet unless the waterway has rock or appropriate geosynthetics to control grade, or a grade stabilization structure. The bottom elevation of the waterway at its confluence with the outlet shall not be higher than the outlet, unless stable rock bottom is present to prevent headcuts.

Vegetative Establishment. Upon completion of the Grassed Waterway the companion Critical Area Planting practice (342) will be applied to all areas needing vegetative cover. Plant species, seedbed preparation, seeding rates, seeding dates, seeding depths, fertility requirements, and planting methods will be consistent with appropriate sections and tables in the "Establishing Vegetative Practices in Kentucky" document located in Section IV of the FOTG.

Establish vegetation as soon as conditions permit. Use mulch anchoring, nurse crop, rock, straw or hay bale dikes, fabric checks, filter fences, or runoff diversion to protect the vegetation until it is established. Planting of a close growing crop, e.g. small grains or millet, on the contributing watershed prior to construction of the grassed waterway can also significantly reduce the flow through the waterway during establishment.

CONSIDERATIONS

Establish an appropriate width of vegetation on one or both sides of the waterway or add other sediment control measures above the waterway such as residue management to improve water quality and reduce sediment deposition in the waterway. Consider increasing the channel depth and/or designing

areas of increased width or decreased slope to trap and store sediment to reduce the amount of sediment that leaves a field. Be sure to provide for regular cleaning out the waterway when trapping sediment in this manner.

Avoid areas where unsuitable subsurface, subsoil, substratum material that limits plant growth such as salts, acidity, root restrictions, etc., may be exposed during implementation of the practice. Where areas can not be avoided, seek recommendations from a soil scientist for ameliorating the condition or, if not feasible consider over-cutting the waterway and add topsoil over the cut area to facilitate vegetative establishment.

Avoid or protect if possible important wildlife habitat, such as woody cover or wetlands when determining the location of the grassed waterway. If trees and shrubs are incorporated, they should be retained or planted in the periphery of grassed waterways so they do not interfere with hydraulic functions. Medium or tall bunch grasses and perennial forbs may also be planted along waterway margins to improve wildlife habitat. Waterways with these wildlife features are more beneficial when connecting other habitat types; e.g., riparian areas, wooded tracts and wetlands. When possible, select species of vegetation that can serve multiple purposes, such as benefiting wildlife, while still meeting the basic criteria needed for providing a stable conveyance for runoff.

Water-tolerant vegetation may be an alternative to subsurface drains or stone center waterways on some wet sites.

Use irrigation in dry regions or supplemental irrigation as necessary to promote germination and vegetation establishment.

Provide livestock and vehicular crossings as necessary to prevent damage to the waterway and its vegetation.

Add width of appropriate vegetation to the sides of the waterway for wildlife habitat.

Consider establishing filter strips or field borders on each side of the waterway to improve water quality or wildlife habitat, respectfully.

Consider including diverse legumes or other forbs that provide pollen and nectar for native bees. In dry regions, these sites may be able to support flowering forbs with higher water requirements and thus provide bloom later in the summer

The construction of a grassed waterway can disturb large areas and potentially affect cultural resources. Be sure to follow state cultural resource protection policies before construction begins.

Consider fencing the waterway to protect the vegetation during the establishment period.

PLANS AND SPECIFICATIONS

Prepare plans and specifications for grassed waterways that describe the requirements for applying the practice according to this standard. As a minimum the plans and specifications shall include:

- A plan view of the layout of the grassed waterway.
- Typical cross sections of the grassed waterway(s).
- Profile(s) of the grassed waterway(s).
- Disposal requirements for excess soil material.
- Site specific construction specifications that describe in writing the installation of the grassed waterway. Include specification for control of concentrated flow during construction and vegetative establishment.
- Vegetative establishment requirements will be part of the accompanying Critical Area Planting practice (342).

OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE

Provide an operation and maintenance plan to review with the landowner. Include the following items and others as appropriate in the plan.

- Establish a maintenance program to maintain waterway capacity, vegetative cover, and outlet stability. Vegetation

damaged by machinery, herbicides, or erosion must be repaired promptly.

- Maintain the waterway to its established width. Do not narrow the waterway when tilling or spraying the adjacent field. Cut spray equipment off when crossing waterways.
- Protect waterway from concentrated flow by using diversion of runoff or mechanical means of stabilization such as silt fences, mulching, haybale barriers and etc. to stabilize grade during vegetation establishment.
- Minimize damage to vegetation by excluding vehicles and livestock whenever possible, especially during wet periods. Permit grazing in the waterway only when a controlled grazing system is being implemented.
- Inspect grassed waterways regularly, especially following heavy rains. Fill, compact, and reseed damaged areas immediately. Remove sediment deposits to maintain capacity of grassed waterway.
- Avoid use of herbicides that would be harmful to the vegetation in and adjacent to the waterway area.
- Avoid using waterways as turn-rows during tillage and cultivation operations.
- Mow or periodically graze vegetation to maintain capacity and reduce sediment deposition. Mowing may be appropriate to enhance wildlife values, but must be conducted to avoid peak nesting season (May 15th – August 1st).
- Control noxious weeds.
- Do not use waterways as a field road. Avoid crossing with heavy equipment when wet.
- Hay can be harvested from waterways but must be harvested early enough during the growing season so that vegetation can partially grow back out before frost and freezing. If hay is not harvested, mow or clip to control weeds and undesirable vegetation.

- Do not allow the edges of the waterway to become higher than the adjacent area and exclude runoff from entering into the waterway. High places should be removed and reseeded to enhance drainage into the waterway. Spoil can be spread into adjacent areas as long as it does not interfere with surface drainage.

REFERENCES

Agricultural Research Service, Agriculture Handbook 667, Stability Design of Grass-Lined Open Channels.

National Engineering Handbook, Part 650, Engineering Field Handbook, Chapter 7, Grassed Waterways.

Establishing Vegetative Practices in Kentucky (A complimentary document to KY FOTG 327, 340, 342, 386, 412, 643 & 645 practice standards). August 2008. Section IV of the KY FOTG

NRCS Practice Standards:

- Critical Area Planting (342)
- Lined Waterway or Outlet (468)
- Filter Strip (393)
- Subsurface Drainage (606)
- Underground Outlet (620)