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 water conveyance channels
- Reduce concentrated flow erosion
- Reduce sheet, rill, & 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 the material’s availability. The mulch materials may consist of natural or artificial 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 its desired purpose prior to mulching.

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.
If the following crop is not planted into the existing mulch, remove synthetic mulches from the field prior to the next crop. Do not incorporate (e.g., disk) synthetic mulches into the soil without the expressed recommendation from the manufacturer or supplier instructions as a bio-degradable mulch made from plant materials rather than petroleum based materials.

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 will 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 material 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 at no less than 2 inches depth. Common practices range from 2 – 6 inches depending on the amount of sunlight needed for the soil beneath the mulch. For soil or seed protection before germination, use less mulch (2 in). For weed prevention use more mulch (6 inches). 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 less than 20:1 adjacent to watercourses to prevent nitrogen availability from quick decomposition within or around the water. Evaluate appropriate distance based upon site conditions during the planning phase.

**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) that allow less oxygen penetration than coarser materials should not be 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 allows adequate light and air penetration to the seedbed to ensure proper germination and emergence.

**Additional Criteria to Maintain or 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. Consider the C:N ratio of your mulch as ratios above 30:1 C:N will likely have a temporary nitrogen drawdown from the soil if the mulch is incorporated in the soil.

Evaluate the system using the current approved soil conditioning index (SCI) procedure to ensure that the system results in a score of zero or higher.

**CONSIDERATIONS**

Evaluate the effects of mulching on soil moisture related to 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, which could lead to plant diseases or pests. Excessive mulch may also prevent rainfall or irrigation from reaching plants.

Organic materials with C:N ratios of less than 20:1 will release nitrate-nitrogen that could cause water quality impairments.

Organic materials with C:N ratios greater than 30:1 may have a temporary effect on soil nitrogen availability and influence plant yields.

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.

Mulching may also provide habitat for beneficial organisms and provide pest suppression. Scout the mulch beds periodically for both beneficial and for pest organisms to monitor population levels and potential pest pressure.

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.

Use IPM to guide the timing and applications of insecticides and herbicides using care to consider the effect of these applications on weed seed 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 the nonmulched 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, unless site specific plant material is benefitted by closer mulch applications. 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 rules. Certified weed-free mulches are preferred.

PLANS AND SPECIFICATIONS
Prepare specifications for each site and purpose on the implementation requirements document. Documentation must include—

- Purpose(s) of the mulch.
- Type of mulch material(s) to be used.
- Percent cover or thickness of mulch material, as applicable.
- Timing of application.
- Site preparation.
- Description of the proper method of netting, applying tackifiers, or method of anchoring mulch.
- 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 to 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 damage to the mulch material from equipment, human traffic, animals, wind/water or storm events.

Prevent any fire damage to the mulch if using high C:N material that could internally combust during decomposition in the fields, or dry materials that may easily catch fire due to site specific conditions (flame weeding, cigarette smoking, excessive frost prevention heat/flames).

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

Monitor and control undesirable weeds and other pests in mulched areas.

REFERENCES
Canada-Saskatchewan Irrigation Diversification Centre. Outlook, Saskatchewan.


