

NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE  
CONSERVATION PRACTICE STANDARD

**CONSERVATION COVER**

(Ac.)

CODE 327



**DEFINITION**

Establishing and maintaining permanent vegetative cover

**PURPOSE**

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

- Reduce sheet, rill, and wind erosion and sedimentation.
- Reduce ground and surface water quality degradation by nutrients and surface water quality degradation by sediment.
- Reduce emissions of particulate matter (PM), PM precursors, and greenhouse gases. )
- Enhance wildlife, pollinator and beneficial organism habitat.
- Improve soil health.

**CONDITION WHERE PRACTICE APPLIES**

This practice applies on all lands needing permanent herbaceous vegetative cover. This practice does not apply to plantings for forage production or to critical area plantings. This practice can be applied on a portion of the field.

**CRITERA****General Criteria Applicable to All Purposes**

Select species that are adapted to the soil, ecological sites, and climatic conditions that are suitable for the planned purpose and site conditions.

Do not plant any species found on the Florida Dep. of Agriculture and Consumer Services or Florida Dep. of Environmental Protection noxious or prohibited weeds lists

(<http://www.freshfromflorida.com/Divisions-Offices/Plant-Industry/Business-Services/Plant-Pest-Permits/Noxious-Weed-Permit>). Additionally, do not plant any species listed as a Category 1 invasive plant species as defined by the Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council ([FLEPPC - Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council](#))

Periodic removal of some products such as high value trees, medicinal herbs, nuts, and fruits is permitted provided the conservation purpose is not compromised by the loss of vegetation or harvesting disturbance.

Choose seeding rates and planting methods that will be adequate to accomplish the planned purpose. Certified seed should be used when available. This information can be found in the guidance provided with Florida NRCS Conservation Practice Standards [Forage and Biomass Planting, Code 512](#); [Range Planting, Code 550](#); [Tree and Shrub Establishment, Code 612](#).

Select planting dates and planting methods that ensure that planted materials have an acceptable rate of survival. Additionally handle seed or planting stock in a manner that will not compromise acceptable survival rate.

Inoculate legumes with appropriate inoculant at planting.

Prepare the site by establishing a consistent seeding depth. Eliminate weeds that would impede the establishment and growth of selected species. Base the timing and equipment selection on the site and soil conditions. Weed control can be achieved by a combination of burning, mechanical or biological methods. Weed control must conform with Florida Conservation Practice Standard [Integrated Pest Management, Code 595](#); [Herbaceous Weed Control, Code 315](#); [Brush Management, Code 314](#), and/or [Prescribed Burning, Code 338](#).

Apply nutrients as needed to ensure crop establishment and planned growth in a manner that conforms with Florida NRCS Conservation Practice Standard [Nutrient Management, Code 590](#).

Impact to cultural resources, wetland, and Federal and State protected species needs to be determined prior to implementation of this practice. Any impacts need to be avoided or minimized to the extent practical during planning, design and implementation of this conservation practice in accordance with established National and Florida NRCS Policy, [General Manual](#) Title 420-Part 401, Title 450-Part 401, and Title 190-Parts 410.22 and 410.26; National Planning and Procedures Handbook FL Supplement to Parts 600.1 and 600.6; [National Cultural Resources Procedures Handbook](#); and the [National Environmental Compliance Handbook](#).

**Additional Criteria to Reduce Sheet, Rill, and Wind Erosion and Sedimentation**

Determine and maintain the amount of plant biomass and cover needed to reduce wind and water erosion to the planned soil loss objective by using the current approved wind and/or water erosion prediction technology.

**Additional Criteria to Reduce Emissions of Particulate Matter (PM), PM Precursors, and greenhouse gases**

In perennial crop systems such as orchards, vineyards, berries and nursery stock, establish vegetation to provide full ground coverage in the alleyway during mowing and harvest operations to minimize generation of particulate matter.

**Additional Criteria to Enhance Wildlife, Pollinator and Beneficial Organism Habitat**

Plant a diverse mixture grasses and forbs species to promote bio-diversity and meet the needs of the targeted species using approved habitat appraisal guides, evaluation tools, and appraisal worksheets for the respective state.

Base selection and planting rates on values for the wildlife under consideration. See Florida Conservation Practice Standard Upland [Wildlife Habitat Management, Code 645](#), and [Wetland Wildlife Habitat Management, Code 644](#), and their accompanying guidance.

Locate habitat plantings to reduce pesticide exposures that could harm wildlife, pollinators, and other beneficial organisms

**Additional Criteria to Improve Soil Health**

To maintain or improve soil organic matter, select plants that will produce high volumes of organic material. The amount of biomass needed will be determined using the current soil conditioning index procedure.

**CONSIDERATIONS**

This practice may be used to promote the conservation of wildlife species in general, including threatened and endangered species.

Certified seed and planting stock that is adapted to the site should be used when it is available.

On sites where annual grasses are an expected weed problem, it may be necessary to postpone nitrogen fertilizer application until the planted species are well established. Mowing may be needed during the establishment period to reduce competition from weeds.

Where applicable this practice may be used to conserve and stabilize archeological and historic sites.

Consider rotating management and maintenance activities (e.g., mow only one-fourth or one-third of the area each year) throughout the managed area to maximize spatial and temporal diversity.

Where wildlife management is an objective, the food and cover value of the planting can be enhanced by using a habitat evaluation procedure to aid in selecting plant species and by providing or managing for other habitat requirements necessary to achieve the objective. Encouraging plant species diversity and establishing plantings that result in multiple structural levels of vegetation within the conservation cover will maximize wildlife use.

Where pollinator and wildlife habitat are primary purposes consider less dense seeding rates as long as soil loss is within tolerable soil loss limits.

To provide habitat for natural enemies of crop pests, select a mix of plant species that provide year round habitat and food (accessible pollen or nectar) for the desired beneficial species. Consider habitat requirements of predatory and parasitic insects, spiders, insectivorous birds and bats, raptors, and terrestrial rodent predators. Consult Land Grant University Integrated Pest Management recommendations for beneficial habitat plantings to manage the target pest species.

Use a diverse mix of cover plant species that come into bloom at different times and provide a sequence of bloom throughout the year (e.g., plant at least three flowering species from each of the three bloom periods (spring, summer, and fall)).

Where practical, use native species that are appropriate for the identified resource concern and management objective. Consider trying to re-establish the native plant community for the site.

If a native cover (other than what was planted) establishes and this cover meets the intended purpose and the landowner's objectives, the cover should be considered adequate.

During vegetation establishment, natural mulches, such as wood products or hay, can be used to conserve soil moisture, support beneficial soil life, and suppress competing vegetation.

### PLANS AND SPECIFICATIONS

Prepare plans and specifications for the site to include, but are not limited to the following:

- recommended species,
- seeding rates and dates,
- establishment procedures,
- management actions needed to insure and adequate stand.

Record specifications and operation and maintenance information on approved Implementation Requirement document.

### OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE

Mowing and harvest operations in a perennial crop system such as orchards, vineyards, berries, and nursery stock shall be done in a manner which minimizes the generation of particulate matter.

Do not conduct maintenance practices and activities that disturb cover during the reproductive period for the desired species if wildlife habitat enhancement is a purpose. For grassland nesting species this is March 1 – July 15. Exceptions should be considered for periodic burning or mowing when necessary to maintain the health of the plant community. Refer to Florida NRCS [Upland Wildlife Habitat Management, Code 645, Guidance](#) for more information.

Control noxious weeds and other invasive species.

Mowing may be needed during the establishment period to reduce competition from weeds.

To benefit insect food sources for grassland nesting birds, spraying or other control of noxious weeds shall be done on a “spot” basis to protect forbs and legumes that benefit native pollinators and other wildlife.

Re-vegetate bare spots.

### REFERENCES

Renard, K.G., G.R. Foster, G.A. Weesies, D.K. McCool and D.C. Yoder. 1997. Predicting Soil Erosion by Water: A Guide to Conservation Planning with the Revised Universal Soil Loss Equation (RUSLE), Agricultural Handbook Number 703.

Preventing or mitigating potential negative impacts of pesticides on pollinators using IPM and other conservation practices. Nat. Agron. Tech Note 9. Washington, DC.  
<http://directives.sc.egov.usda.gov/>