

NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE  
CONSERVATION PRACTICE STANDARD

FIREBREAK  
(Feet)  
CODE 394

DEFINITION

A strip of bare land or vegetation that retards fire.

strips at least 15-20 feet wide. Woody plants should be controlled by clearing, cutting or application of approved herbicide. Herbaceous material planted with or without legumes should be sod forming grasses.

PURPOSES

- To prevent the spread of wildfire.
- To control prescribed burns.

**BARE GROUND OR MINERAL SOIL:** Develop non-vegetated barriers on the contour or on short and gentle slopes that will keep erosion below the allowable soil loss. The strips should be a minimum of 15 feet wide and prepared and maintained by plowing and periodic discing. Plowed barriers developed to prevent the spread of a controlled burn or wildfire, shall be revegetated if there is no further need for the firebreak.

CONDITIONS WHERE PRACTICE APPLIES

All land uses where protection from wildfire is needed or prescribed burning is applied.

CRITERIA

General Criteria Applicable to All Purposes

- Firebreaks may be temporary or permanent and shall consist of fire-resistant vegetation, non-flammable materials, bare ground, or a combination of these.
- Firebreaks will be of sufficient width and length to contain the fire.
- Firebreaks shall be located to minimize risk to the resources being protected.
- Plant species selected for vegetated firebreaks will be noninvasive, comprised of attributes making them capable of retarding fire, and easy to maintain.
- Erosion control measures shall prevent sediment from leaving the site.
- Comply with applicable laws and regulations, including the state's Best Management Practices (BMPs).

**BURNED FIREBREAKS:** A common type of firebreak is a black-line strip that is burned to remove most fuels prior to burning. The width shall be sufficient to control a high intensity head fire.

**SNOW BANKS:** Snow banks are a seasonal type of firebreak and are most useful when burning high risk or difficult areas such as odd areas and old buildings.

**CHEMICAL AND FOAM RETARDANTS:** Chemical and foam retardants are usually applied on the fire line just prior to initiation. A drawback is the need for a second crew and for special equipment. In addition, the cost of material can be expensive.

**WET LINES:** Wet lines are similar to applying chemical and foam retardants, except that the water can be applied more cheaply with simpler equipment. Unlike retardants, wet lines can evaporate rapidly, requiring more caution during initiation.

Criteria For Firebreaks

**SOD FIREBREAKS:** Develop and maintain natural or planted herbaceous firebreaks by fertilizing, mowing, watering or grazing of

NRCS-Minnesota  
September 2009

Conservation practice standards are reviewed periodically and updated if needed. To obtain the current version of this standard, contact the MN Natural Resources Conservation Service in your area or download it from the electronic Field Office Technical Guide for Minnesota

## CONSIDERATIONS

- **Use barriers such as streams, lakes, ponds, rock cliffs, roads, field borders, skid trails, landings, drainage canals, railroads, utility right-of-ways, cultivated land, or other areas as existing firebreaks.**
- **Locate firebreaks on the contour where possible to minimize risk of soil erosion. Treat land according to practice standard 342—Critical Area Planting or 327—Conservation Cover.**
- **Attempt to locate firebreaks near ridge crests and valley bottoms. If winds are predictable, firebreaks should be located perpendicular to the wind and on the windward side of the area to be protected.**
- **Select plant species that provide wildlife habitat if they are capable of providing a satisfactory firebreak.**
- **Design and layout should include multiple uses.**
- **Consider cultural resources when planning this practice. This practice may adversely affect cultural resources and should comply with GM 420, Part 401 during planning, prior to installation and during maintenance.**

## PLANS AND SPECIFICATIONS

**Specifications for applying this practice shall be prepared for each site and recorded using approved specification sheets, job sheets, technical notes, and narrative statements in the conservation plan and the burn plan, or other acceptable documentation.**

## OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE

- **Mow or graze vegetative firebreaks to avoid a build-up of excess litter and to control weeds.**
- **Inspect all firebreaks for woody materials such as dead limbs or blown down trees and remove them from the firebreak.**

- **Inspect firebreaks annually and rework bare ground firebreaks as necessary to keep them clear of flammable vegetation.**
- **Repair erosion control measures as necessary to ensure proper function.**
- **Access by vehicles or people will be controlled to prevent damage to the firebreak.**
- **Bare ground firebreaks, which are no longer needed, will be stabilized.**

## REFERENCES

Higgins, K.F., Kruse, A.D., Piehl, J.L. 1989. Prescribed Burning Guidelines in the Northern Great Plains. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Cooperative Extension Service-SDSU. USDA EC 760.