

**Natural Resources Conservation Service
Conservation Practice Standard**

**CONSERVATION COVER
(Ac.)
CODE 327**

DEFINITION

The establishment and maintenance of perennial vegetative cover to protect soil and water resources on land retired from agriculture production.

PURPOSES

- To reduce erosion and sedimentation
- To improve water quality
- To enhance wildlife habitat

CONDITIONS WHERE PRACTICE APPLIES

This practice applies on land retired from agriculture production. It requires a permanent vegetative cover to achieve protection from erosion, filtration of potential pollutants, and protection for wildlife. This practice does not apply to plantings for forage production or to critical area plantings.

CRITERIA

General Criteria Applicable to All Purposes

Plant species suitable to soil type and climatic conditions.

Plant species shall be suitable for the planned purpose.

Seeding rates and planting method shall be in accordance with this section of the FOTG or to achieve the planned purpose.

Vegetative manipulation will be accomplished by prescribed burning, mechanical, biological or chemical methods, or by any combination of the four. Burning should be the last choice due to its adverse effects on soil and air quality.

All fertilizer and lime shall be applied according to the Nutrient Management standard.

Additional Criteria to Reduce Erosion and Sedimentation

Vegetation. Vegetation grown on retired lands shall consist of permanent grasses, legumes, grass-legume mixtures, trees or shrubs. Plant species adaptable to the site, and tolerant of the anticipated depth of sediment deposition on flat (generally less than 1.5 percent) slopes.

Level of erosion control. The level of erosion control achieved by the permanent vegetative cover on retired agriculture land shall meet or exceed the level specified by the conservation plan objective. It shall be determined using approved erosion prediction technology (RUSLE), accounting for the impact of other conservation practices in the system.

Additional Criteria to Improve Water Quality

- a. Vegetation will filter sediment and dissolved and sediment-attached substances. It can reduce erosion and the movement of sediment, pathogens, and soluble and sediment-attached substances that can be carried by runoff to down stream surface water bodies. Vegetation can also reduce potential groundwater contamination, as plant roots and increasing organic matter levels may directly and indirectly remove excessive amounts of contaminants from the soil.
- b. The effects of growing roots will improve nutrient balance in the root zone.

Additional Criteria for Enhancing Wildlife Habitat

Planting and establishment. Grasses and legumes may be planted in mixtures to encourage maximum plant density.

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

Management and maintenance. Methods used shall be to protect the soil resource from erosion. Avoid clipping or spraying grass species until July, to preserve a suitable environment for birds during the primary nesting period.

CONSIDERATIONS

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

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) to maximize space 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 providing or managing for other habitat requirements necessary to achieve the objective.

Use native species when available. Consider trying to re-establish the native community for the site.

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

PLANS AND SPECIFICATIONS

Specifications for this practice shall be prepared for each site. They shall include, but not limited to, recommended species, seeding rates, dates, depths, establishment procedures, and other management practices needed to ensure and adequate stand. Specifications shall be recorded using approved specifications sheets, job sheets, or narrative statements in the conservation plan.

OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE

Maintenance practices and activities on grassland species should not disturb the primary nesting period for birds. Exceptions should be considered for periodic burning or mowing when necessary to maintain the health of the plant community. Mowing may be needed during the establishing period to reduce competition from annual weeds.

Any use of fertilizer, pesticides and other chemicals shall not compromise the intended purpose.

REFERENCES

The 1991 Year Book of Agriculture, Agriculture and the Environment.