

NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE
MONTANA CONSERVATION PRACTICE STANDARD

FIREBREAK (FEET)

CODE 394

DEFINITION

A permanent or temporary strip of bare or vegetated land planned to retard fire.

firebreak in future years, all disturbed areas must be re-seeded. Use FOTG, Section IV, Practice Standards and Specifications: Critical Area Planting (Code 342), Range Planting (Code 550), or Forage and Biomass Planting (Code 512).

PURPOSE

- Reduce the spread of wildfire.
- Contain prescribed burns.

Firebreaks shall be located to minimize risk to the resources being protected.

Where bare ground firebreaks are used, adequate erosion control treatments must be installed and maintained.

CONDITIONS WHERE PRACTICE APPLIES

This practice applies on all land uses where protection from wildfire is needed or prescribed burning is applied.

Erosion control measures shall be installed to prevent sediment from leaving the site.

Avoid rill and gully erosion. Roll the grades of the firebreak, out slope the firebreak, and install waterbars where necessary to keep slope length as short as possible.

CRITERIA

General Criteria Applicable to All Purposes

Locate firebreaks along major travel corridors and adjacent to farm facilities, communities, and other structures needing protection.

Firebreak width is a function of the amount and height of fuels and the degree of protection needed. Idle cropland, forests, and other areas of permanent vegetation contain several years of accumulated growth and readily burn once ignited. An extra level of protection is needed in these situations.

Firebreaks may be temporary or permanent and shall consist of fire-resistant vegetation, non-flammable materials, bare ground, or a combination of these.

Comply with applicable federal, state, tribal, and local laws and regulations, during the installation, operation and maintenance of this practice.

Firebreaks will be of sufficient width and length to contain the expected fire.

Additional Criteria for Open Areas – Rangelands, Pasturelands, Croplands

Plant species selected for vegetated firebreaks will be noninvasive and capable of retarding fire.

Open area firebreaks can be a single bare ground strip or a bare ground strip and some form of low or fire-resistant vegetation.

Use Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG), Section IV, Practice Standards and Specifications for Prescribed Burning (Code 338), where a bare ground firebreak is used in conjunction with a prescribed burn. If there is no need to maintain the

Contact the Farm Services Agency (FSA) for appropriate policies and procedures regarding firebreaks in idle cropland.

NRCS, MT
June 2011

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

NOTE: This type of font (**AaBbCcDdEe 123..**) indicates NRCS National Standards.
This type of font (**AaBbCcDdEe 123..**) indicates Montana Supplement.

CONSIDERATIONS

The need for a firebreak is dependent upon the value of the resource to be protected. The cost of installation should be weighed against the loss of the resource should a wildfire occur.

Proper functioning of a firebreak is dependent upon establishing an adequate width of bare ground or fire-retarding vegetation or conditions. Adequate firebreak width is strongly dependent on the height, quantity, and combustibility of the surrounding vegetation.

Firebreaks may be installed by plowing, burning, chemical burn back, grazing, mowing, clipping, or through establishment of low-growing vegetation that remains succulent throughout most of the growing season.

Topography can be used to improve firebreak effectiveness. 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 **low-fuel** areas as existing firebreaks. Electric lines can be hazardous in heavy smoke as they may conduct electricity.

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.

Locate on the contour where practicable to minimize risk of soil erosion.

In remote areas, follow grades and topography that will allow the use of firebreaks for equipment travel.

Design and layout should include multiple uses.

Consider using diverse species combinations which best meet locally native wildlife and pollinator needs.

Select plant species that are adapted to the site, low-growing, fire retarding, and possibly provide forage if desired.

When using barriers consider the effects on wildlife and fisheries.

Consider the effects that a firebreak would have on erosion and the movement of sediment and substances that would possibly be carried by runoff.

Disturbed areas may serve as sites for weed establishment. Follow-up treatment may be needed to control problem weeds.

Re-seed eroded areas and other areas disturbed during firebreak establishment that are not part of the firebreak. Use FOTG, Section IV, Practice Standards and Specifications: Critical Area Planting (Code 342), Range Planting (Code 550), or Forage and Biomass Planting (Code 512).

Consider the beneficial and other effects of installation of the firebreak on cultural resources and threatened and endangered species, natural areas, riparian areas and wetlands.

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.

As a minimum, the firebreak practice will have the following components in its plan and specifications:

- **A narrative that describes the producer's goals and objectives. Identify why the practice is needed and feasible.**
- **An environmental assessment of the planned practice that includes the potential impacts on soil, water, animals, plants, air and humans.**
- **An alternative narrative that identifies and describes several methods that could be used to address the resource issue. Also identifying the producer selected method.**
- **The Montana Firebreak practice job sheet and specification.**
- **Plan map and soil map of site with location of practice on the map.**
- **Operations and maintenance instructions.**

OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE

Just prior to fire season mow, disk, **blade** or graze vegetative firebreaks to avoid a build-up of excess litter and to control weeds. Treatment should be timed to reduce impacts to nesting **animals** when possible.

Firebreaks will be maintained throughout the summer and fall. The following maintenance will be performed as needed:

1. Mowed strip firebreaks will be re-clipped if the vegetation re-grows and achieves more than approximately eight (8) inches in height.

2. Inspect firebreaks at least annually and rework by tillage or with chemicals bare ground firebreaks as necessary to keep them clear of flammable vegetation.

3. Inspect all firebreaks for woody materials such as dead limbs or blown down trees or other combustibles and remove them from the firebreak.

Repair erosion control measures as necessary to ensure proper function.

Access by vehicles or people will be controlled to prevent damage. Use FOTG, Section IV, Practice Standards and Specifications: Access Control (Code 472).

Bare ground firebreaks, which are no longer needed, will be stabilized.

For a properly functioning firebreak, follow these operation and maintenance activities for the life of the practice. The life span of this practice is ten (10) years.