NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE
CONSERVATION PRACTICE STANDARD

CRITICAL AREA PLANTING
(Ac.)

CODE 342

DEFINITION

Establishing permanent vegetation on sites that have, or are expected to have, high erosion rates, and on sites that have physical, chemical or biological conditions that prevent the establishment of vegetation with normal practices.

PURPOSE

This practice supports one or more of the following purposes:

- Stabilize stream and channel banks, pond and other shorelines – Resource concern (SOIL EROSION– Excessive bank erosion from streams shorelines or water conveyance channels).
- Stabilize areas with existing or expected high rates of soil erosion by wind or water – Resource concern (SOIL EROSION – Concentrated flow erosion and/or SOIL EROSION - Sheet, rill, & wind erosion and/or SOIL QUALITY DEGRADATION – Concentration of salts or other chemicals).
- Stabilize areas, such as sand dunes and riparian areas – Resource concern (SOIL EROSION – Concentrated flow erosion and/or SOIL EROSION - Sheet, rill, & wind erosion).

CONDITIONS WHERE PRACTICE APPLIES

This practice applies to highly disturbed areas such as:

- active or abandoned mined lands;
- urban restoration sites;
- construction areas;
- conservation practice construction sites;
- areas needing stabilization before or after natural disasters such as floods, hurricanes, tornados and wildfires;
- eroded banks of natural channels, banks of newly constructed channels, and lake shorelines;
- other areas degraded by human activities or natural events.

CRITERIA

General Criteria Applicable to All Purposes

Site Preparation. A site investigation shall be conducted to identify any physical, chemical, or biological conditions that could affect the successful establishment of vegetation.

Areas to be planted will be cleared of unwanted materials and smoothed or shaped, if needed, to meet planting and landscaping purposes.

A suitable seedbed shall be prepared for all seeded species. Compacted layers will be ripped and the soil re-firmed prior to seedbed preparation.

As site conditions dictate, when grading slopes, stockpile topsoil to be redistributed over area to be planted

Species Selection. Species selected for seeding or planting shall be suited to local site conditions and intended uses, and be common to the site or location.

Selected species will have the capacity to achieve adequate density and vigor to stabilize the site within an appropriate period.

Establishment of Vegetation. Seeds will be planted using the method or methods best suited to site and soil conditions.

Sod placement shall be limited to areas that can naturally supply needed moisture or sites that can be irrigated during the establishment period.

Sod will be placed and anchored using techniques to ensure that it remains in place until established.

Conservation practice standards are reviewed periodically and updated if needed. To obtain the current version of this standard, contact your Natural Resources Conservation Service State Office or visit the Field Office Technical Guide.

Species, rates of seeding or planting, minimum quality of planting stock (e.g. pure live seed (PLS) or stem caliper), method of seedbed preparation, and method of establishment shall be specified before application. Only viable, high quality seed or planting stock will be used.

Seeding or planting shall be done at a time and in a manner that best ensures establishment and growth of the selected species

Planting shall be done during approved times for the species to be used.

Apply soil amendments (e.g. lime, fertilizer, compost) according to the requirements in the local Field Office Technical Guide.

Plantings shall be mulched as necessary to ensure establishment. Other disturbed areas shall be mulched as necessary to prevent erosion.

Additional Criteria to Stabilize Stream and Channel Banks, Pond and other Shorelines

Bank and Channel Slopes. Channel side slopes shall be shaped so that they are stable and allow establishment and maintenance of desired vegetation.

A combination of vegetative and structural measures may be necessary on slopes steeper than 2:1 to ensure adequate stability.

Species Selection. Plant material used for this purpose shall:

- be adapted to the hydrologic zone (see Fig. 1) into which they will be planted.
- be adapted and proven in the regions in which they will be used.
- be compatible with existing vegetation in the area
- protect the channel banks but not restrict channel capacity.

Establishment of Vegetation. The species used, planting rates, spacing, and methods and dates of planting shall be based on local planting guides or technical notes.

Identify and protect desirable existing vegetation during practice installation.

A combination of vegetative and structural practices using living and inert material shall be used when flow velocities, soils, and bank stability preclude stabilization by vegetative establishment alone.

If the existing vegetation on a site will compete with species to be established vegetatively (e.g. bare-root, containerized, ball-and-burlap, potted), it will be controlled in a manner that ensures the successful establishment of the planted species.

Streambank stabilization plantings shall be in accordance with the NRCS Engineering Field Handbook Part 650, Chapter 16 (Streambank and Shoreline Protection) and Chapter 18 (Soil Bioengineering for Upland Slope Protection & Erosion Reduction).

Site Protection and Access Control. Restrict access to planted areas until fully established.

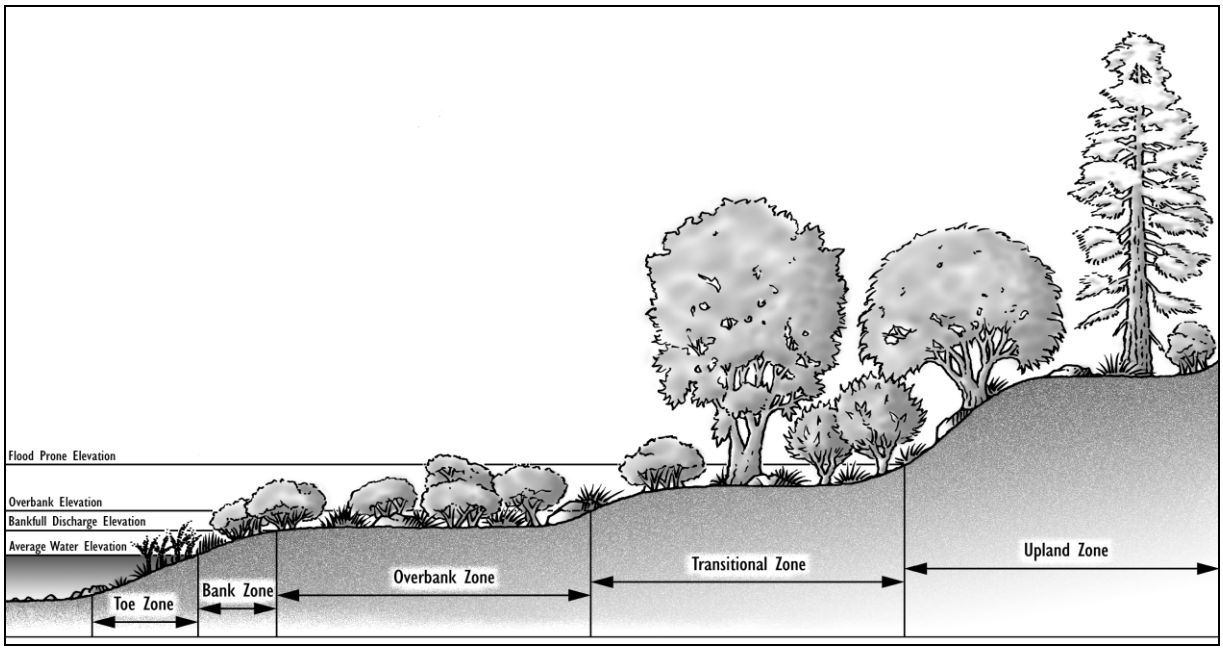

Figure 1. Location of hydrologic zones along a channel or shoreline.

Definitions and descriptions of hydrologic zones used for channels and shorelines:

Bankfull Discharge Elevation - In natural streams, it is the elevation at which water fills the channel without overflowing onto the flood plain.

Bank Zone - The area above the Toe Zone located between the average water level and the bankfull discharge elevation. Vegetation may be herbaceous or woody, and is characterized by flexible stems and rhizomatous root systems.

Overbank Zone - The area located above the bankfull discharge elevation continuing upslope to an elevation equal to two thirds of the flood prone depth. Vegetation is generally small to medium shrub species.

Toe Zone - The portion of the bank that is between the average water level and the bottom of the channel, at the toe of the bank. Vegetation is generally herbaceous emergent aquatic species, tolerant of long periods of inundation.

Transitional Zone - The area located between the overbank zone, and the flood prone width elevation. Vegetation is usually larger shrub and tree species.

Upland Zone – The area above the Transitional Zone; this area is seldom if ever saturated.

Note: some channels or shorelines have fewer than four hydrologic zones because of differences in soils, topography, entrenchment and/or moisture regime.

Additional Criteria to Restore Coastal Areas, such as Sand Dunes and Riparian Areas

Plants for sand dunes and coastal sites must be able to survive being buried by blowing sand, sand blasting, salt spray, salt water flooding, drought, heat, and low nutrient supply.

Sand trapping devices such as sand fences or brush matting shall be included in the re-vegetation/stabilization plans where applicable.

CONSIDERATIONS

Species or mixes that are adapted to the site and have multiple benefits should be considered. Native species may be used when appropriate for the site.

To benefit pollinators and other wildlife, flowering shrubs and wildflowers with resilient root systems and good soil holding capacity also should be considered for incorporation as a small percentage of a larger grass-dominated planting. Where appropriate consider a diverse mixture of forbs to support pollinator habitat.

Avoid species that may harbor pests. Species diversity should be considered to avoid loss of function due to species-specific pests.

Planning and installation of other conservation practices such as Diversion (code 362), Obstruction Removal (code 500), Subsurface Drain (code 606), or Underground Outlet (code 620) may be necessary to prepare the area or ensure vegetative establishment.

Areas of vegetation established with this practice can create habitat for various type of wildlife. Maintenance activities, such as mowing or spraying, can have detrimental effects on certain species. Perform management activities at the times and in a manner that causes the least disruption to wildlife.

PLANS AND SPECIFICATIONS

Prepare plans and specifications for each field or management unit according to the criteria and operation and maintenance sections of this standard. Record practice specifications using approved Implementation Requirement document.

The following elements shall be addressed in the plan, as applicable, to meet the intended purpose.

- Site preparation
- Topsoil requirements
- Fertilizer application
- Seedbed/planting area preparation
- Methods of seeding/planting
- Time of seeding/planting
- Selection of species
- Seed/plant source
- Seed analysis
- Seeding rate/plant spacing
- Mulching
- Supplemental water needed for establishment
- Protection of plantings
- Describe successful establishment (e.g. minimum percent ground/canopy cover, percent survival, stand density.

OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE

Use of the area shall be managed as long as necessary to ensure the site remains stable.

Plantings shall be protected from pests (e.g. weeds, insects, diseases, livestock, or wildlife) as necessary to ensure long-term survival.

Inspections, reseeding or replanting, and fertilization may be needed to ensure that this practice functions as intended throughout its expected life. Observation of establishment progress and success should be performed at regular intervals until the practice has met the criteria for successful establishment and implementation.

All areas to be grazed will follow a grazing plan that meets the criteria in the local Field Office Technical Guide.

Grazing will be permanently excluded on high hazard sites, such as cut banks, areas of seepage, or other potential unstable areas.

REFERENCES

Federal Interagency Stream Restoration Working Group. 1998. Stream corridor restoration: principles, processes, and practices. National Engineering Handbook, Part 653.

USDA-NRCS. 2007. National Engineering Handbook, Part 654. Stream restoration guide.

USDA-NRCS. 2010. The PLANTS Database (http://plants.usda.gov , checked September 2010). National Plant Data Center