

**NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE
CONSERVATION PRACTICE STANDARD**

MULCHING

(Ac.)

CODE 484

DEFINITION

Applying plant residues or other suitable materials produced off site, to the land surface.

PURPOSE

This practice supports one or more of the following purposes:

- Conserve soil moisture.
- Reduce energy use associated with irrigation.
- Provide erosion control.
- Facilitate the establishment of vegetative cover.
- Improve soil health.
- Reduce airborne particulates.

CONDITIONS WHERE PRACTICE APPLIES

This practice applies to all lands where mulches are needed. This practice may be used alone or in combination with other practices.

CRITERIA

General Criteria Applicable to All Purposes

Select mulching materials depending primarily on the purpose(s) for the mulch application, site conditions, and the material availability. Mulch materials shall consist of natural and/or artificial materials that are of sufficient dimension (depth or thickness)

and durability to achieve the intended purpose for the required time period.

Prior to mulching, prepare the soil surface in order to achieve the desired purpose.

Apply the mulch material evenly and, if necessary, anchor to the soil. Use tackifiers, emulsions, pinning, netting, crimping or other acceptable methods as anchors if needed to hold the mulch in place for specified periods.

In cases where excessive furrow erosion may occur due to concentrated flows from plastic mulches, take appropriate measures to protect the furrows.

As a minimum, apply manufactured mulches according to the manufacturer's specifications.

Mulch material needs to be of a quality to meet the intended purpose.

Additional Criteria to Conserve Soil Moisture and/or Reduce Energy Use Associated with Irrigation

Mulch materials applied to the soil surface shall provide at least 60 percent surface cover to reduce potential evaporation.

Additional Criteria to Provide Erosion Control and to Reduce Airborne Particulates

When mulching with cereal grain straw or grass hay, apply at a rate to achieve a minimum 70 percent ground cover. Determine mulch rate using current erosion prediction technology to reach the soil conservation objective.

When mulching with wood products such as wood chips, bark, or shavings or other wood materials, apply a minimum 2-inch thickness comprised of particles that remain in place during heavy rainfall and or strong wind events.

When mulching with gravel or other inorganic material, apply a minimum 2 inch thickness. The gravel shall consist of pieces 0.75 to 2 inches in diameter.

Additional Criteria to Establish Vegetative Cover

Mulch shall be applied at a rate that achieves a minimum of 70 percent ground cover to provide protection from erosion and runoff and yet allow adequate light and air penetration to the seedbed to ensure proper germination and emergence.

Additional Criteria to Improve Soil Health

Use plant-based mulching materials of suitable quantity and quality to add organic matter, provide food and shelter for soil biota, and protect the soil surface from raindrop impact and crusting while allowing for adequate soil aeration.

Apply mulch materials with a carbon to nitrogen ratio (C:N) less than 30:1 so that soil nitrogen is not immobilized by soil biota. Do not apply mulch with C:N less than 20:1 to an area of designed flow in watercourses.

An evaluation of the system using the current approved soil conditioning index (SCI) procedure results in zero or higher.

CONSIDERATIONS

Evaluate the effects of mulching on evaporation, infiltration, and runoff. Mulch material may affect microbial activity in the soil surface, increase infiltration, and decrease runoff, erosion, and evaporation. The temperature of the surface runoff may also be lowered.

Apply mulch material used to conserve soil moisture prior to moisture loss. Prior to mulching, ensure soil under shallow rooted crops is moist, as these crops require a constant supply of moisture.

Mulch materials with a high water holding capacity and/or high impermeability to water droplets may adversely affect the water needs of plants.

Fine textured mulches (e.g. rice hulls) which allow less oxygen penetration than coarser materials should be no thicker than 2 inches.

Avoid excessively thick or tightly packed mulches that can result in soggy, anaerobic conditions at the soil surface during wet weather; or prevent rainfall or overhead irrigation from reaching the soil during times of moisture deficit

Organic materials with C:N ratios of less than 20:1 will release nitrate-nitrogen which could cause water quality impairments.

Finely-divided plant residues (e.g., sawdust) and those rich in soluble carbohydrates (e.g., fresh green-chopped sorghum-sudangrass, corn, or other grasses) that have a C:N ratio greater than 30 can tie up soil N and necessitate supplemental N applications on crops. Coarser materials such as grain straw and chipped brush usually do not reduce crop-available soil N levels unless and until they are incorporated into the soil by tillage or cultivation.

Mulching may also provide habitat for beneficial insects and provide pest suppression.

Use mulch of sufficient ground cover, and suitable thickness and texture to provide habitat for ground beetles, spiders, and other predators of weed seeds and crop pests. Select crops to be mulched, mulching materials, and rates of application that do not contribute to pest problems. Avoid excessively thick or tightly-packed mulches, which can interfere with the movement of ground beetles and other beneficial organisms, and may increase the incidence of crop pests and diseases.

During the period when weed seed predation is desired and predators are most active, avoid pesticide applications or

pesticide exposures that could adversely affect weed seed consumers.

Low permeability mulches (e.g. plastic) may increase concentrated flow and erosion on un-mulched areas.

Clear and infra-red transmissible (IRT) plastics have the greatest warming potential. They are transparent to incoming radiation and trap the longer wavelengths radiating from the soil. Black mulches are limited to warming soils by conduction only and are less effective.

Clear plastic mulches allow profuse weed growth and may negate the benefits of soil warming. Black mulches provide effective weed control. Wavelength selective (IRT) plastic provides the soil warming characteristics of clear mulch with the weed control ability of black mulch.

Light-reflecting mulches such as white or aluminized plastic film or bright straw can repel some pests.

Select mulching materials and methods that are compatible with the crop and site. Consider potential beneficial or detrimental effects of mulching materials on the biotic community surrounding the crop, including beneficial soil micro- and macro-organisms, as well as plant pathogens and plant pests. These effects are specific to site, mulch, and crop, and may include enhanced soil microbial activity, increased or reduced levels of crop diseases, and toxic (allelopathic) activity against the crop, weeds, or other beneficial or pest organisms.

Keep mulch 3 to 6 inches away from plant stems and crowns to prevent disease and pest problems. Additional weed control may be needed around the plant base area.

Deep mulch provides nesting habitat for ground-burrowing rodents that can chew extensively on tree trunks and/or tree roots. Light mulch applied after the first cold weather may prevent rodents from nesting.

Some mulch material may adversely affect aquatic environments through changes in water chemistry or as waterborne debris. Consider placing mulch in locations that minimizes these risks.

Consider potential effects of soil physical and chemical properties. For all organic or transitioning to organic operations, follow all National Organic Program (NOP) rules.

PLANS AND SPECIFICATIONS

Documentation shall include:

- Purpose of the mulch
- Type of mulch material used
- The percent cover and/or thickness of mulch material
- Timing of application
- Site preparation
- Listing of netting, tackifiers, or method of anchoring.

Use the practice job sheet to plan and certify this practice.

OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE

Prepare an operation and maintenance plan for the site. As a minimum, include the following actions:

Inspect mulched areas periodically and reinstall or repair mulch as needed to accomplish the intended purpose.

Evaluate the effectiveness of the mulch (application, amount of cover provided, durability, etc.) and adjust the management or type of mulch to better meet the intended purpose(s).

Remove or incorporate mulch materials in a manner that is consistent with the intended purpose and site conditions.

Operate equipment near and on the site in a manner that will not compromise the intended purpose of the mulch.

Prevent or repair any fire damage to the mulch material.

Properly collect and dispose of artificial mulch material after intended use.

Monitor and control undesirable weeds in mulched areas.

REFERENCES

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