



NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE CONSERVATION PRACTICE STANDARD

FIREBREAK

CODE 394 (FT.)

DEFINITION

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

PURPOSE

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

CONDITIONS WHERE PRACTICE APPLIES

This practice applies on 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 expected fire.

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

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

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

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. Electric lines can be hazardous in heavy smoke as they may conduct electricity.

When using barriers consider the effects on wildlife and fisheries.

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.

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

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

Design and layout should include multiple uses.

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.

Most firebreaks consist of short cool season grasses such as Kentucky Blue Grass or Creeping Red Fescue. Mow periodically to keep brush out and grass green and growing.

Firebreaks for Tree Plantations. The primary firebreak should be around the perimeter of the planted area. It should consist of a grassy strip at least 14 feet wide which can also serve as a road, and a bare soil strip adjacent to the trees at least 14 feet wide.

Within the plantation, secondary firebreaks should be located at intervals of 300 feet or less. These firebreaks should be at least 18 feet wide and will normally be used as access roads and should generally follow the contour to avoid erosion.

Firebreaks established between the plantation and buildings should be at least 100 feet wide.

Firebreaks for Grasslands and Other Areas. Prescribed burning may be a management technique in and around areas of wetlands managed for wildlife, natural areas of prairie vegetation, and the like. Control of the prescribed burn will typically require firebreaks.

- A perimeter firebreak is usually adequate to confine fire to the intended area. Firebreaks should be non-combustible and at least two times as wide as the height of the vegetation to be burned.
- In very large areas, secondary breaks within the area may be necessary to limit size and intensity of burn. Design will be governed by size of area, topography and flammability of fuels. See Wisconsin NRCS Conservation Practice Standard (WI NRCS CPS), Prescribed Burn (code 338), for details.
- A minimum firebreak of 50 feet should be used to protect buildings or other high value areas. This should include a 14 feet bare strip adjacent to the area to be burned.
- Burned firebreaks, using backing fire techniques during prescribed burns, should have an adequate width based on fuel types prior to ignition of headfire (i.e., 100 feet for tall grass; 200 feet for tall grass/woody vegetation).

Construction of Firebreaks. Stumps, logs, large stones, and other debris will be removed from soil surface prior to soil preparation.

Firebreaks to be maintained in a bare soil condition will be worked up to expose bare soil. Bare firebreaks will not be used if a significant erosion hazard exists if such firebreaks run up and down hill.

Legumes may be seeded with the grasses to improve wildlife habitat value. Proportion of legumes to grasses will be held to a minimum to prevent a buildup of fuel on the surface.

PLANS AND SPECIFICATIONS

Specifications for applying this practice shall be prepared for each site and recorded using approved job sheets, technical notes, and narrative statements in the conservation plan. An approved burn plan shall be utilized prior to prescribed burning.

Bare soil firebreaks should be used where erosion hazards are controlled.

OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE

Mow, disk, 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 when possible.

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

Inspect firebreaks at least 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.

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

FEDERAL, TRIBAL, STATE AND LOCAL LAWS

Users of this standard should be aware of potentially applicable federal, tribal, state and local laws, rules, regulations or permit requirements governing cover crops. This standard does not contain the text of federal, tribal, state or local laws.

REFERENCES

USDA, NRCS Wisconsin Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG), Section IV, Practice Standards and Specifications.

In accordance with Federal civil rights law and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) civil rights regulations and policies, the USDA, its Agencies, offices, and employees, and institutions participating in or administering USDA programs are prohibited from discriminating based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, gender identity (including gender expression), sexual orientation, disability, age, marital status, family/parental status, income derived from a public assistance program, political beliefs, or reprisal or retaliation for prior civil rights activity, in any program or activity conducted or funded by USDA (not all bases apply to all programs). Remedies and complaint filing deadlines vary by program or incident. Persons with disabilities who require alternative means of communication for program information (e.g., Braille, large print, audiotape, American Sign Language, etc.) should contact the responsible Agency or USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TTY) or contact USDA through the Federal Relay Service at (800) 877-8339. Additionally, program information may be made available in languages other than English. To file a program discrimination complaint, complete the USDA Program Discrimination Complaint Form, AD-3027, found online at [How to File a Program Discrimination Complaint](#) and at any USDA office or write a letter addressed to USDA and provide in the letter all of the information requested in the form. To request a copy of the complaint form, call (866) 632-9992. Submit your completed form or letter to USDA by: (1) mail: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, D.C. 20250-9410; (2) fax: (202) 690-7442; or (3) email: program.intake@usda.gov. USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.