# SUBSURFACE DRAIN

(Feet)
Code 606

Natural Resources Conservation Service
Conservation Practice Standard

## I. Definition

A conduit installed beneath the ground surface to collect and/or convey excess water.

## II. Purpose

This practice may be applied as part of a resource management system to achieve one or more of the following purposes.

- Remove or distribute excessive soil water.
- Remove salts and other contaminants from the soil profile.

## III. Conditions Where Practice Applies

This standard applies to agricultural land where a shallow water table exists and where a subsurface drainage system can mitigate the following adverse conditions caused by excessive soil moisture.

- Poor health, vigor and productivity of plants.
- Poor field trafficability.
- Accumulation of salts in the root zone.
- Health risk and livestock stress due to pests such as flukes, flies, or mosquitoes.
- Wet soil conditions around farmsteads, structures, and roadways.

This standard also applies where collected excess water can be distributed through a subsurface water utilization or treatment area.

## IV. 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 subsurface drains. This standard does not contain the text of federal, tribal, state, or local laws.

## V. Criteria

The following criteria apply to all purposes.

### A. Capacity

Design capacity shall be based on the following, as applicable.

1. Application of a locally proven drainage coefficient for the acreage drained. The minimum coefficients are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

**Table 1**
**Drainage Coefficients**
**(No Open Inlets)**

| Soil | Field Crops (inches) | Truck Crops (inches) |
|---|---|---|
| Mineral | ⅜ to ½ | ½ to ¾ |
| Organic | ½ to ¾ | ¾ to 1½ |

The condition in Table 1 assumes that surface drainage is adequate. The selected drainage coefficient applies to the entire area being drained.

**Table 2**
**Drainage Coefficients**
**(Surface Inlets in Subsurface Drains)**

| Soil | Field Crops | | Truck Crops | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Blind Inlets (inches) | Open Inlets (inches) | Blind Inlets (inches | Open Inlets (inches) |
| Mineral | ½ to ¾ | ½ to 1 | ¾ to 1 | 1 to 1½ |
| Organic | ½ to 1 | ½ to 1½ | ¾ to 2 | 2 to 4 |

Note: A ½-inch coefficient may be used if the organic soil occurs only as a small pocket in the vicinity of the inlet.

The selected drainage coefficient from Table 2 will apply to the entire watershed contributing runoff to the surface inlet, except where only a small amount of runoff will be impounded at the location of the inlet with the remainder flowing away in a confined channel. For the latter case, the drain (tile) shall be large enough to remove the impounded water in 24 hours, plus providing additional capacity for the

required internal drainage. Blind inlets should only be used in areas where surface drainage will handle most of the surface water.

2. Yield of groundwater based on the expected deep percolation of irrigation water from the overlying fields.

3. Comparison of the site with other similar sites where subsurface drain yields have been measured.

4. Measurement of the rate of subsurface flow at the site during a period of adverse weather and groundwater conditions.

5. Application of Darcy's law to lateral or artesian subsurface flow.

6. Contributions from surface inlets based on hydrologic analysis or flow measurements.

**B. Size**

The size of subsurface drains shall be computed by applying Manning's formula, using roughness coefficients recommended by the manufacturer of the conduit. The size shall be based on the maximum design flow rate and computed by using one of the following assumptions:

1. The hydraulic gradeline parallel to the bottom grade of the subsurface drain with the conduit flowing full at design flow (normal condition, no internal pressure).

2. The conduit flowing partly full where a steep grade or other conditions require excess capacity.

3. The conduit flowing under pressure with hydraulic grade line set by site conditions, which differs from the bottom grade of the subsurface drain.

For assumptions 1 or 2 above, the minimum size of subsurface drains may be determined using the drainage charts in the NRCS National Engineering Handbook (NEH) Part 650, Engineering Field Handbook, Chapter 14.

All subsurface drains shall have a nominal diameter that equals or exceeds 3 inches.

**C. Internal Hydraulic Pressure**

Drains are normally designed to flow with no internal pressure, and the flow is normally classified as open channel. The design internal pressure of drains shall not exceed the limits recommended by the manufacturer of the conduit.

**D. Horizontal Alignment**

A change in horizontal direction of the subsurface drain shall be made by one of the following methods:

1. The use of manufactured fittings.

2. The use of junction boxes or manholes.

3. A gradual curve of the drain trench on a radius that can be followed by the trenching machine while maintaining grade.

**E. Location, Depth, and Spacing**

The location, depth, and spacing of the subsurface drain shall be based on site conditions including soils, topography, groundwater conditions, crops, land use, outlets, saline or sodic conditions, and proximity to wetlands.

The minimum depth of cover over subsurface drains may exclude sections of conduit near the outlet or through minor depressions, providing these sections of conduit are not subject to damage by frost action or equipment travel.

Continuous pipe shall be used where it is not feasible to obtain cover as specified, such as where drain lines cross waterways, or roads, the outlet end of mains, or near structures. The continuous pipe shall be of sufficient strength and durability to withstand expected loadings and weathering.

In mineral soils, the minimum depth of cover over subsurface drains shall be 2.0 feet.

In organic soils, the minimum depth of cover after initial subsidence shall be 3.0 feet. If water control structures are installed and managed to limit oxidation and subsidence of the soil, the minimum depth of cover may be reduced to 2.5 feet.

For flexible conduits, maximum burial depths shall be based on manufacturer's recommendations for the site conditions, or based on a site-specific engineering design consistent with methods in NRCS National Engineering Handbook (NEH), Part 636, Chapter 52, Structural Design of Flexible Conduits.

For computation of maximum allowable loads on subsurface drains of all materials, use the trench and bedding conditions specified and the compressive strength of the conduit. The design load on the conduit shall be based on a combination of equipment loads, trench loads, and road traffic as applicable.

Equipment loads shall be based on the maximum expected wheel loads for the equipment to be used, the minimum height of cover over the conduit, and the trench width.

Equipment loads on the conduit may be neglected when the depth of cover exceeds 6 feet. Trench loads shall be based on the type of backfill over the conduit, the width of the trench, and the unit weight of the backfill material.

**F. Minimum Velocity and Grade**

In areas where sedimentation is not a hazard, minimum grades shall be based on site conditions and a velocity of not less than 0.5 feet per second. If a sedimentation hazard exists, a velocity of not less than 1.4 feet per second shall be used to establish the minimum grades. Otherwise, provisions shall be made for preventing sedimentation by use of filters or by collecting and periodically removing sediment from installed traps, or by periodically cleaning the lines with high-pressure jetting systems or cleaning solutions.

**G. Maximum Velocity**

Design velocities for perforated or open joint pipe shall not exceed those given in Table 3, unless special protective measures are installed. Design velocities with protective measures shall not exceed manufacturer's recommended limits.

**Table 3**
**Maximum Flow Velocities by Soil Texture**

| Soil Texture | Velocity (ft./sec.) |
|---|---|
| Sand and sandy loam<br>Muck (sapric) | 3.5 |
| Silt and silt loam<br>Mucky peat (hemic) | 5.0 |
| Silty clay loam | 6.0 |
| Clay and clay loam<br>Peat (fibric) | 7.0 |
| Coarse sand or gravel | 9.0 |

On sites where topographic conditions require drain placement on steep grades and design velocities greater than indicated in Table 3, special measures shall be used to protect the conduit or surrounding soil.

Protective measures for high velocities shall include one or more of the following, as appropriate:

1. Enclose continuous perforated pipe or tubing with fabric type filter material or properly graded sand and gravel.

2. Use non-perforated continuous conduit or a watertight pipe, and sealed joints.

3. Place the conduit in a sand and gravel envelope, or initial backfill with the least erodible soil available.

4. Select rigid butt end pipe or tile with straight smooth sections and square ends to obtain tight fitting joints.

5. Wrap open joints of the conduit with tar-impregnated paper, burlap, or special fabric-type filter material.

6. Install larger diameter drain conduit in the steep area to help assure a hydraulic grade line parallel with the conduit grade.

7. Install open air risers for air release or entry at the beginning and downstream end of the high velocity section.

Releases from drainage water management structures shall not cause flow velocities in perforated or open joint drains to exceed allowable velocities in Table 3, unless protective measures are installed.

## H. Thrust Control

Follow pipe manufacturer's recommendations for thrust control or anchoring, where the following conditions exist.

1. Axial forces that tend to move the pipe down steep slopes.

2. Thrust forces from abrupt changes in pipeline grade or horizontal alignment, which exceed soil bearing strength.

3. Reductions in pipe size.

In the absence of manufacturer's data, thrust blocks shall be designed in accordance with NEH, Part 636, Chapter 52, Structural Design of Flexible Conduits.

## I. Outlets

Drainage outlets shall be adequate for the quantity and quality of water to be discharged. Sinkholes and wells are not to be used as outlets.

Outlets to surface water shall be designed to operate without submergence under normal conditions.

For discharge to streams or channels, the outlet invert shall be located above the elevation of normal flow and at least 1.0 foot above the channel bottom.

Outlets shall be protected against erosion and undermining of the conduit, entry of tree roots, damaging periods of submergence, and entry of rodents or other animals into the subsurface drain.

A continuous section of pipe without open joints or perforations, and with stiffness necessary to withstand expected loads, shall be used at the outlet end of the drain line. Minimum lengths for the outlet section of conduit are provided in Table 4. Single-wall Corrugated Plastic Pipe is not suitable for the section that outlets into a ditch or channel.

For outlets into sumps, the discharge elevation shall be located above the elevation at which pumping is initiated.

**Table 4**
**Minimum Length of Outlet Pipe Sections**

| Pipe Diameter (in.) | Min. Section Length (ft.) |
|---|---|
| 8 and smaller | 10 |
| Larger than 8 | 20 |

The use and installation of outlet pipe shall conform to the following requirements:

1. If burning vegetation on the outlet ditch bank is likely to create a fire hazard, the material from which the pipe is fabricated must be fireproof.

2. At least two-thirds of the pipe section shall be buried in the ditch bank, and the cantilever section must extend to the toe of the ditch side slope, or the side slope shall be protected from erosion.

3. If ice or floating debris may damage the outlet pipe, the outlet shall be recessed to the extent that the cantilevered part of the pipe will be protected from the current of flow in the ditch or channel.

4. Headwalls used for subsurface drain outlets must be adequate in strength and design to avoid washouts and other failures.

## J. Protection from Biological and Mineral Clogging

Drains in certain soils are subject to clogging of drain perforations by bacterial action in association with ferrous iron, manganese, or sulfides. Iron ochre can clog drain openings and can seal manufactured (fabric) filters. Manganese deposits and sulfides can clog drain openings.

Where bacterial activity is expected to lead to clogging of drains, access points for cleaning the drain lines shall be provided.

Where possible, outlet individual drains to an open ditch to isolate localized areas of contamination and to limit the translocation of contamination throughout the system.

**K. Protection From Root Clogging**

Problems may occur where drains are in close proximity to perennial vegetation. Drain clogging may result from root penetration by water-loving trees, such as willow, cottonwood, elm, soft maple, some shrubs, grasses, and deep-rooted perennial crops growing near subsurface drains.

The following steps may reduce the incidence of root intrusion:

1. Install a continuous section of non-perforated pipe or tubing with sealed joints, through the root zone.

2. Remove water-loving trees for a distance of at least 100 feet on each side of the drain, and locate drains a distance of 50 feet or more from non-crop tree species.

3. Provide for intermittent submergence of the drain to limit rooting depth by installing a structure for water control (e.g., an inline weir with adjustable crest) that allows for raising the elevation of the drain outlet.

**L. Water Quality**

Septic systems shall not be directly connected to the subsurface drainage system, nor shall animal waste be directly introduced into the subsurface drainage system.

**M. Materials**

Subsurface drains include flexible conduits of plastic, bituminized fiber, or metal; rigid conduits of vitrified clay or concrete, or other materials of acceptable quality.

The conduit shall meet strength and durability requirements for the site. All conduits shall meet or exceed the minimum requirements of the appropriate specifications published by the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM), American Association of State Highway Transportation Officials (AASHTO), or the American Water Works Association (AWWA); and the minimum requirements indicated in NRCS FOTG Section IV, Wisconsin Construction Specification 44, Corrugated Polyethylene Tubing.

**N. Foundation**

If soft or yielding foundations are encountered, the conduits shall be stabilized and protected from settlement. The following methods are acceptable for the stabilization of yielding foundations.

1. Remove the unstable material and provide a stable bedding of granular envelope or filter material.

2. Provide continuous cradle support for the conduit through the unstable section.

3. Bridge unstable areas using long sections of conduit having adequate strength and stiffness to ensure satisfactory subsurface drain performance.

4. Place conduit on a flat, treated plank. This method shall not be used for flexible (e.g., corrugated plastic pipe) without proper bedding between the plank and conduit.

**O. Filters and Filter Material**

Filters shall be used around conduits, as needed, to prevent movement of the surrounding soil material into the conduit. The need for a filter shall be determined by the characteristics of the surrounding soil material, site conditions, and the velocity of flow in the conduit. A suitable filter shall be used if any of the following conditions exist.

1. Local experience with soil conditions indicates a need.

2. Soil materials surrounding the conduit are dispersed clays, silts with a Plasticity Index less than 7, or fine sands with a Plasticity Index less than 7.

3. The soil is subject to cracking by desiccation.

4. The method of installation may result in inadequate consolidation between the conduit and backfill material.

If a sand-gravel filter is specified, the filter gradation shall be based designed in accordance with NEH, Part 633, Chapter 26, Gradation Design of Sand and Gravel Filters.

Specified filter material must completely encase the conduit such that all openings are covered with at least 3 inches of filter material, except where the top of the conduit and side filter material are to be covered by a sheet of plastic or similar impervious material to reduce the quantity of filter material required. In all cases, the resulting flow pattern through filter material shall be a minimum of 3 inches in length.

Geotextile filter materials may be used, provided that the effective opening size, strength, durability, and permeability are adequate to prevent soil movement into the drain throughout the expected life of the system. Geotextile filter material shall not be used where the silt content of the soil exceeds 40 percent.

**P. Envelopes and Envelope Material**

Envelopes shall be used around subsurface drains if needed for proper conduit bedding or to improve flow characteristics into the conduit.

Materials used for envelopes do not need to meet the gradation requirements of filters, but must not contain materials that will cause an accumulation of sediment in the conduit, or materials that will render the envelope unsuitable for bedding of the conduit.

Envelope materials shall consist of sand-gravel, organic, or similar material. One hundred percent of sand-gravel envelope materials shall all pass a 1.5-inch sieve; not more than 30 percent shall pass a Number 60 sieve; and not more than 5 percent shall pass the Number 200 sieve.

Organic or other compressible envelope materials shall not be used below the centerline of flexible conduits. All organic or other compressible materials shall be of a type that will not readily decompose.

**Q. Placement and Bedding**

Placement and bedding requirements apply to both excavation trenching and plow type installations.

Place the conduit on a firm foundation to ensure proper alignment.

Conduits shall not be placed on exposed rock, or on stones greater than 1½ inches for conduits 6 inches or larger in diameter, or on stones greater than ¾ inch for conduit less than 6 inches in diameter. Where site conditions do not meet this requirement, the trench must be over-excavated a minimum of 6 inches and refilled to grade with a suitable bedding material.

If installation will be below a water table or where unstable soils are present, special equipment, installation procedures, or bedding materials may be needed. These special requirements may also be necessary to prevent soil movement into the drain or plugging of the envelope if installation will be made in materials such as soil slurries.

For the installation of corrugated plastic pipe with diameters of 8 inches or less, one of the following bedding methods shall be specified.

1. A shaped groove providing an angle of support of 90 degrees or greater shall be provided in the bottom of the trench for tubing support and alignment.

2. A sand-gravel envelope, at least 3 inches thick, to provide support.

3. Compacted bedding material beside and to 3 inches above the conduit.

For the installation of corrugated plastic pipe with diameters larger than 8 inches, the same bedding requirements shall be met except that a semi-circular or trapezoidal groove shaped to fit the conduit with a support angle of 120 degrees will be used rather than a V-shaped groove.

For rigid conduits installed in a trench, the same requirements shall be met except that a groove or notch is not required. For trench installations where a sand-gravel or a compacted bedding is not specified, the initial backfill for the conduit shall be selected material containing no hard objects (e.g., rocks or consolidated chunks of soil) larger than 1.5 inches in diameter. Initial backfill shall be carried to a minimum of 3 inches above the conduit.

**R. Auxiliary Structures and Protection**

The capacity of any structure installed in the drain line shall be no less than that of the line or lines feeding into or through them.

Structures for water table management, with provisions to elevate the outlet and allow submergence of the upstream drain, shall meet

applicable design criteria in Wisconsin NRCS FOTG Conservation Practice Standards 587, Structure for Water Control, and 554, Drainage Water Management.

If the drain system is to include underground outlets, the capacity of the surface water inlet shall not be greater than the maximum design flow in the downstream drain line or lines. Covers or trash racks shall be used to ensure that no foreign materials are allowed in the drain lines. Inlets shall be protected from entry of animals or debris. If sediment may pose a problem, sediment traps shall be installed.

The capacity of a relief well system shall be based on the flow from the aquifer, the well spacing, and other site conditions, and shall be adequate to lower the artesian water head to the desired level. Relief wells shall not be less than 4 inches in diameter.

Junction boxes, manholes, catch basins, and sand traps must be accessible for maintenance. A clear opening of not less than 2.0 feet will be provided in either circular or rectangular structures.

The drain system shall be protected against turbulence created near outlets, surface inlets, or similar structures. Continuous non-perforated or closed-joint pipe shall be used in drain lines adjoining the structure where excessive velocities will occur.

Junction boxes shall be installed where three or more lines join or if two lines join at different elevations. If the junction box is buried, a solid cover should be used, and the junction box should have a minimum of 1.5 feet of soil cover.

If not connected to a structure, the upper end of each subsurface drain line will be closed with a tight-fitting cap or plug of the same material as the conduit, or other durable materials.

Watertight conduits designed to withstand the expected loads shall be used where subsurface drains cross under irrigation canals, ditches, or other structures.

## VI. Considerations

When planning, designing, and installing this practice, the following items should be considered.

- Protection of shallow drains, auxiliary structures, and outlets from damage due to freezing and thawing.
- Proper surface drainage to reduce the required intensity of the subsurface drainage system.
- Designs that incorporate drainage water management practices (or facilitate its future incorporation) to reduce nutrient loading of receiving waters.
- Drainage laterals oriented along elevation contours to improve the effectiveness of drainage water management structures.
- The effects of drainage systems on runoff volume, seepage, and the availability of soil water needed for plant growth.
- Confirmation of soil survey information with site investigation, including auguring and shallow excavations to identify soil profile hydraulic characteristics, soil texture layering, water table depth, etc.
- The effects of drainage systems on the hydrology of adjacent lands.
- Subsoiling or ripping of soils with contrasting texture layers to improve internal drainage.
- Installations in dry soil profile to minimize problems of trench stability, conduit alignment, and soil movement into the drain.
- The effects to surface water quality.
- Use of temporary flow blocking devices to reduce risk of drain water contamination from surface applications of manure.

## VII. Plans and Specifications

Plans and specifications for installing subsurface drains shall be in keeping with this standard and shall describe the requirements for applying the practice to achieve its intended purpose.

At a minimum, plans specifications shall include, as applicable: location of drainage system; wetland delineation(s); conduit lengths, grades, sizes, and type of materials; structure locations, dimensions, and elevations; outlet locations, elevations, and

protection required; and normal water level elevations in outlet ditches or streams.

## VIII. Operation and Maintenance

The Operation and Maintenance (O&M) Plan shall provide specific instructions for operating and maintaining the system to insure proper function as designed. At a minimum, the O&M Plan shall address:

- Necessary periodic inspection and prompt repair of system components (e.g., structures for water control, underground outlets, vents, drain outlets, trash and rodent guards).

- Winterization protection from freezing conditions for drainage systems in cold climates.

## IX. References

USDA, NRCS, National Engineering Handbook, Part 624, Chapter 4, Subsurface Drainage.

USDA, NRCS, National Engineering Handbook, Part 633, Chapter 26, Gradation Design of Sand and Gravel Filters.

USDA, NRCS, National Engineering Handbook, Part 636, Chapter 52, Structural Design of Flexible Conduits.

USDA, NRCS, Wisconsin Field Office Technical Guide, Section IV, Conservation Practice Standards and Specifications.