



DATE: November 23, 2015

WASHINGTON BULLETIN 190-16-?

SUBJECT: ECS- FY16 RIPARIAN BUFFER WIDTH PLANNING CRITERIA

Purpose: To announce the planning criteria for riparian buffer quantity required to treat Habitat Degradation resource concern in Fiscal Year 2016.

Expiration Date: September 30, 2016

Background

WA NRCS has been exploring options to refine planning criteria for riparian buffer quantity (width and length) associated with habitat for aquatic species since targeted salmon recovery funding began in fiscal year 2012. Multiple strategies have been considered and tested through revisions to Biology Technical Note 14. Riparian buffers provide a wide variety of ecological functions from filtering pollutants and water temperature moderation to contributing structured habitat elements for aquatic and terrestrial species. Many of these functions can be provided by a 35-50 foot-wide riparian buffer when composed of vegetative communities appropriate to the site.

NRCS financial assistance continues to be focused on treating natural resource concerns on working land, in both traditional cropland and animal agricultural environments as well as in non-industrial forestland. It is essential that NRCS continue to offer conservation plan alternatives to our agricultural clients that allow continued production and economic viability, while treating water quality and inadequate habitat resource concerns. The changes to the riparian buffer quantity in FY 16 will allow balance between agricultural production and natural resource protection. This incremental change to improvements in fish and wildlife habitat will allow the conservation conversation with working land producers to continue.

Planning Criteria for FY 16

The attached Riparian Buffer Conservation Strategy for Working Land document summarizes the most critical riparian buffer functions that can be anticipated on modified water courses which are common on agricultural lands. The table is structured to assist planners with targeting specific ecological functions and the respective buffer widths that are recommended to restore the selected buffer functions in a working landscape. In the case where multiple functions are targeted for correction, the planner will include the widest buffer requirement in the RMS level alternative that is presented to the landowner.

1. For planning units where Inadequate Fish and Wildlife Habitat-Habitat Degradation resource concern is identified, riparian quantity planning criteria will be as follows:

Minimum Buffer Width of 50 feet on 70% of the length of the planning unit.



Note 50 feet is a minimum width, not an average. The allowance for less than 100% coverage of the buffer length is intended to allow portions of the buffer to have a width less than 50 feet. This will provide alternatives to design a site specific buffer that can accommodate existing access roads, structures, access points for channel maintenance, and other agricultural related infrastructure within the buffer. The buffer will extend a minimum of 50 feet on each side of the channel if the landowner controls management of both sides.

2. For planning units where other Soil, Water, Air, Plant, or Animal resource concerns are identified, the minimum width will meet the needs of the resource concern being treated. Refer to the Criteria sections of applicable Conservation Practices listed in the WA eFOTG Section IV.

Evaluation Tools

Two evaluation tools are needed to document the riparian buffer need for Inadequate Fish and Wildlife Habitat –Habitat Degradation.

1. Biology Technical Note 14 (FY16 version) has been updated to reflect the changes in riparian quantity described above. It can be found as an attachment and also in WA eFOTG Section I.
2. SVAP2 field sheets modified for WA State can also be found as an attachment to and is posted to WA eFOTG Section I.

Financial Assistance

NRCS fully supports the implementation of large conservation buffers. Conservation planners will encourage adoption of buffers wider than the minimum. Financial assistance may be provided up to 180 feet on each side of the channel. When a landowner objective is to restore floodplain habitat and function and financial assistance program rules allow, funding for buffers exceeding 180 feet may be approved with concurrence from Area or State technical specialists.

Discussions for FY17 and Beyond

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife is leading an effort to update its Priority Habitat and Species Management Recommendations for Riparian areas. It is anticipated this document will be released early in 2016. At that time NRCS will consider the content and may choose to update the planning criteria for riparian buffer quantity for use in FY17 and beyond.

If you have questions, please contact Bonda Habets, State Resource Conservationist or Rachel Maggi, West Area Biologist.

ROYLENE RIDES AT THE DOOR
State Conservationist



United States Department of Agriculture

Attachments

1. FY 16 Riparian Buffer Conservation Strategy for Working Lands
2. Biology Technical Note 14 (FY 16 Version)
3. WA SVAP2 Field Sheets

DRAFT