



Conservation buffers are a simple way to help you stay profitable and protect your most valuable asset – your land. Buffers are also a great way to demonstrate your commitment to conservation.

WHAT IS A BUFFER?

Conservation buffers are best described as strips or other areas of land in permanent vegetation that help control pollutants and manage other environmental concerns. Filter strips, riparian buffers (predominantly trees and shrubs next to water courses), field borders, grassed waterways, field windbreaks, shelterbelts, and contour grass strips are all examples of conservation buffers.

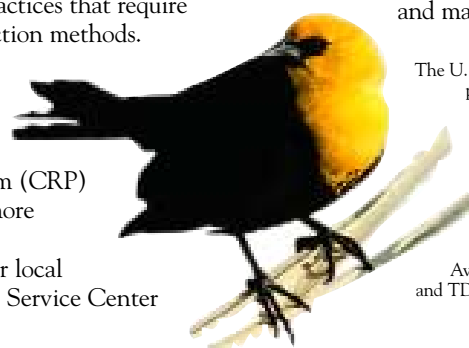
Buffers can be especially helpful to you in maintaining a productive, profitable, and responsible farming or ranching operation. Today, America's farms and ranches do more than produce crops and livestock. They play an important role in maintaining the environmental quality enjoyed by all citizens. Conservation buffers can help you protect soil, air, and water quality and improve fish and wildlife habitat...while you demonstrate your commitment to land stewardship.

WHERE ARE BUFFERS NEEDED?

You can use conservation buffers along streams and around lakes or wetlands. They can also be installed within fields or at field edges. Buffers are most effective when they are combined with other practices, such as conservation tillage, nutrient management, and integrated pest management. Together, these practices can provide you with an effective, profitable conservation program.

WHY DO BUFFERS WORK ECONOMICALLY?

Conservation buffers work economically because they are generally less expensive to install than practices that require extensive engineering and costly construction methods. Buffers also tend to be more economical to maintain than many other practices. And now there are new and higher financial incentives under the continuous Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) sign-up that make use of certain buffers more attractive economically than ever before. Moreover, you can sign up any day at your local U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Service Center



"Riparian Buffer," a paper sculpture by Pat Muchmore



CONSERVATION BUFFERS WORK... ECONOMICALLY AND ENVIRONMENTALLY



(Farm Service Agency and Natural Resources Conservation Service). There is no waiting period with the continuous CRP sign-up, and you need not compete against others to see who gets in. Your offer is automatically accepted if you meet the eligibility requirements.



Under the continuous CRP sign-up, the new and higher incentives for conservation buffers include:

- An up-front signing incentive payment of \$100 to \$150 per acre (depending on contract length) for certain high-priority practices: filter strips, riparian buffers, grassed waterways, shelterbelts, field windbreaks, and living snow fences.
- A practice incentive payment equal to 40 percent of your eligible practice installation cost. This is in addition to the up-to-50-percent cost-share paid by USDA for establishing approved buffers.
- Increases in maintenance payments per acre for certain activities like tree planting, fencing, and water development. Maintenance payments up to \$10 per acre per year are now possible.
- Updated CRP rental rates nationwide to better reflect the agricultural value of grazing land along streams and around lakes and other waterbodies.

Other incentives remain available for certain buffer practices under the continuous CRP sign-up. Some state and local governments, as well as private organizations, also make payments to farmers and ranchers who are willing to install and maintain buffers.

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THE VALUE OF BUFFERS

It's possible that you are already using some conservation buffers in your farming or ranching operation. Buffers can play an important role in your conservation efforts, particularly when used in combination with other practices in a conservation farming or ranching system.

Buffers slow water runoff, trap sediment, and enhance water infiltration in the buffer itself. They also trap fertilizers, pesticides, bacteria, pathogens, and heavy metals, lessening the chance these pollutants will reach surface or ground water sources. Buffers also trap snow and reduce blowing soil in areas with strong winds. They protect livestock from harsh weather, offer a natural habitat for wildlife, and improve fish habitat. Sometimes, buffers help simplify farming operations by squaring off field boundaries, and they may add a measure of safety to field operations where crops are planted and harvested adjacent to steep streambanks. Some buffers, particularly wooded buffers, can even provide a future source of income.

You can alter the look of your farm or ranch with properly installed and well-maintained buffers. Buffers can add beauty, recreational opportunities, and value to your farm or ranch. And buffers are a visible demonstration of your commitment to conservation.

TYPES OF BUFFERS

There are many types of buffers. While each may have different names in different parts of the country, their conservation purposes are similar. This list identifies the common buffer types eligible for the continuous CRP sign-up or which can be installed with the help of other USDA programs.

WELLHEAD PROTECTION AREAS

Land within a maximum 2,000-foot radius from a public well, as designated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) or a state-designated agency, can be enrolled in the continuous CRP sign-up. These circular shaped areas can be "squared off," within limits, to simplify farming operations.

OTHER TYPES OF BUFFERS INCLUDE:

Field Borders – Grass-seeded areas along the edges of crop fields.

Alley Cropping – Crops planted between rows of trees or shrubs.

Herbaceous Wind Barriers – Perennial vegetation planted in rows perpendicular to the prevailing wind direction.

Vegetative Barriers – Narrow, permanent strips of dense, tall, stiff perennial vegetation planted parallel and perpendicular to the dominant slope of the field.

Streambank Plantings – Trees, shrubs, and/or grasses that stabilize and protect streambanks.

RIPARIAN BUFFERS

Plantings of trees, shrubs, and grasses that catch pollutants in both surface runoff and ground water before those pollutants reach a waterbody, such as a stream or lake. Riparian buffers also improve fish and wildlife habitat.



FILTER STRIPS

Strips of grass used to trap sediment, fertilizers, pesticides, and other pollutants before they reach streams and lakes.



GRASSED WATERWAYS

Strips of grass seeded within cropland where water tends to concentrate or flow off a field. While they are primarily used to prevent gully erosion, waterways can be combined with filter strips or riparian buffers to trap sediment and other pollutants.



SHELTERBELTS/FIELD WINDBREAKS

A row or rows of trees or shrubs used to reduce wind erosion, protect young crops, and control blowing snow. These practices also provide excellent protection for wildlife, livestock, houses, and farm buildings. Field windbreaks are similar to shelterbelts but are located along field borders or within the field. In some areas field windbreaks may be called hedgerow plantings.



LIVING SNOW FENCES

Similar to field windbreaks and shelterbelts, living snow fences help manage snow deposits by protecting buildings, roads, and other property. They can also be designed and placed to provide cover for livestock or wildlife and to collect snow to increase soil moisture and nearby water supplies.



CONTOUR GRASS STRIPS

Narrow bands of perennial vegetative cover planted on the contour in a crop field and alternated down the slope with strips of crops. If designed and maintained properly, contour strips can reduce soil erosion, minimize transport of sediment and other water-borne contaminants, and provide wildlife habitat.



CROSS-WIND TRAP STRIPS

Rows of perennial vegetative cover planted in varying widths perpendicular to the prevailing wind direction. These strips can effectively control wind erosion on crop fields subject to high average annual wind speeds.



SHALLOW WATER AREAS FOR WILDLIFE

Areas of shallow water near or within crop fields that are protected by permanent trees, shrubs, and grasses. These areas are vital to enhancing wildlife habitat.



SALT-TOLERANT VEGETATION/VEGETATION TO REDUCE SALINITY

Special areas planted to vegetative cover capable of growing in salty soils and reducing saline seepage.





Buffers protect your land and visually demonstrate your commitment to conservation.



CONTINUOUS CRP SIGN-UP

The continuous CRP sign-up makes it easy for you to install conservation buffers on your farm or ranch. The program allows you to enroll your eligible land in the CRP at any time without having to submit a competitive offer. If you have land covered by an expiring CRP contract, you don't have to make an "all-or-nothing" choice about bringing the land out of CRP. You can decide whether you want to establish buffers on land determined suitable and re-enroll that land in the program. The remaining land can be returned to crop production.



The staff at your local Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) or conservation district office can help you identify the buffer practices available under the continuous CRP sign-up that are suitable for your land. Then you can submit an offer to your local Farm Service Agency (FSA) office. Your offer will be accepted automatically if it meets certain eligibility requirements.

To be eligible, you must have owned the land for a year. Cropland is eligible if it was planted or considered planted to an agricultural commodity in two of the last five crop years and is physically and legally capable of being cropped. Your land does not have to be highly erodible to qualify for the program.

Marginal pasture land that is suitable for use as a riparian buffer is also eligible. Marginal pasture land includes any land along permanent or seasonal streams and around other permanent waterbodies, including wetlands, that is grazed, whether previously seeded to grass or not.

It's that simple. Your local USDA Service Center staff will know what specific technical and financial assistance is available to help you install and maintain conservation buffers, including assistance from state and local programs.

ELIGIBLE BUFFER PRACTICES

Not all buffer practices are eligible for the continuous CRP sign-up. Those that are include:

- Riparian Buffers
- Filter Strips
- Grassed Waterways
- Shelterbelts
- Field Windbreaks
- Living Snow Fences
- Contour Grass Strips
- Cross-Wind Trap Strips
- Shallow Water Areas for Wildlife
- Salt-Tolerant Vegetation/Vegetation that Reduces Salinity
- Designated Wellhead Protection Areas

ECONOMIC INCENTIVES FOR BUFFERS

New and higher financial incentives under the continuous CRP sign-up make conservation buffers economically attractive in most areas of the country. There is the new sign-up incentive payment of \$100 to \$150 per acre for selected practices and the 40 percent incentive payment for practice installation, along with adjusted rental rates for marginal pasture land and higher annual maintenance payments per acre for certain practices. Wider buffers are now possible as well. There also remains a 20 percent incentive, which is added to your annual CRP rental rate, for field windbreaks, grassed waterways, filter strips, and riparian buffers. A 10 percent incentive is added to your annual CRP rental rate for land within designated wellhead protection areas. Of course, CRP rental rates are based on a soil's relative productivity and the average dryland cash rent for comparable land in your vicinity.



In addition to the annual CRP rental rate payments and other incentives, USDA pays up to 50 percent of the cost of establishing a permanent cover on buffers. Among the activities eligible for cost-sharing are site preparation, temporary cover until permanent cover is established, grading or shaping, grass seed, trees or shrubs, plastic mulch, supplemental irrigation, fencing, livestock crossings, and development of supplemental water supplies outside a riparian buffer.



A contract under the continuous CRP sign-up is 10 to 15 years in length, depending on the buffer type and your preference. You receive your annual rental payment after October 1 each year. The sign-up incentive payment, practice incentive payment, and cost-share payments are made once your contract is approved or when you have completed installation of the approved buffers.

OTHER PROGRAMS CAN HELP

If the continuous CRP sign-up does not work for you, there are other USDA programs that can help you install conservation buffers. They include the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), and Stewardship Incentive Program (SIP):

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) – This program provides technical, financial, and educational assistance both within and outside designated priority areas, with half of the resources targeted to livestock-related natural resource concerns and the remainder set aside for other significant conservation priorities.

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) – This is a voluntary program for landowners who want to develop and improve fish and wildlife habitat on private land. It provides both technical assistance and cost-sharing for practice installation.

Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) – This voluntary program helps landowners protect, restore, and enhance wetlands on private property. It provides an opportunity for landowners to receive financial incentives to restore wetlands in exchange for retiring marginal agricultural land.

Stewardship Incentive Program (SIP) – Teamed with the Forest Stewardship Program, SIP provides cost-sharing for improved management of private forest land through multiple practices, including planning, tree planting, fish and wildlife habitat, recreation, riparian restoration, soil erosion control, and forest improvements.



There also are state and local governments and private organizations that provide financial assistance for buffer installations, particularly buffers that control soil erosion, improve water quality, and enhance fish and wildlife habitat.

Your local USDA Service Center or conservation district office can provide more details regarding rental payments, cost-sharing options, and other buffer assistance programs available in your area.

Local Extension Service offices and others can help you determine the economics of a conservation buffer system in your operation. And your state forester's office, consulting foresters, and others can offer advice on what tree and shrub species are appropriate for use in buffers in your area.

You can also speak with agricultural consultants and representatives of agribusiness firms to find out more about conservation buffers and their use on your farm or ranch.

AN INITIATIVE FOR ALL OF AGRICULTURE

USDA's National Conservation Buffer Initiative is an effort to encourage farmers, ranchers, and other landowners to use conservation buffers more extensively for a variety of conservation purposes. NRCS plays a major role in the initiative, along with FSA and the Forest Service; Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service; state conservation agencies; conservation districts; and numerous other public- and private-sector partners.

Conservation buffers are not only profitable but effective from an environmental management point of view and their use is endorsed by many agricultural companies and leading agricultural and conservation organizations.

Because these groups know the importance of sound conservation practices — for individual landowners and the entire economy — they have pledged their support by joining USDA's National Conservation Buffer Team.

Now, it's your turn to make a personal commitment to conservation. Contact your local USDA Service Center for more information about conservation buffers and their use in your farming or ranching operation.

NATIONAL CONSERVATION BUFFER TEAM

- Agricultural Research Service
- Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service
- Economic Research Service
- Environmental Protection Agency
- Farm Service Agency
- Forest Service
- Fish and Wildlife Service
- National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
- Natural Resources Conservation Service
- National Conservation Buffer Council
 - Cargill
 - ConAgra
 - Farmland Industries
 - Monsanto
 - Novartis Crop Protection
 - Pioneer Hi-Bred International
 - Terra Industries
- Southeast Conservation Buffer Campaign
 - B.A.S.S., Inc.
 - Tennessee Valley Authority
- Agricultural Conservation Innovation Center
- Agricultural Retailers Association
- American Crop Protection Association
- American Farmland Trust
- American Farm Bureau Federation
- American Forests
- American Society of Farm Managers and Rural Appraisers
- American Sportfishing Association
- American Soybean Association
- American Water Works Association
- Association of Metropolitan Water Agencies
- Association of Metropolitan Sewerage Agencies
- Association of California Water Agencies
- Association of State Drinking Water Administrators
- Association of State and Interstate Water Pollution Control Administrators
 - Cenex/Land O'Lakes
 - Center for Rural Affairs
- Coalition for a Competitive Food and Agriculture System
- Conservation Technology Information Center
- Coors Brewing Company
- Ducks Unlimited
- Environmental Council of the States
- Environmental Defense
- Environmental Working Group
- The Fertilizer Institute
- Henry A. Wallace Institute for Alternative Agriculture
- International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies
- Izaak Walton League of America
- Land Stewardship Project
- Land Trust Alliance
- Metropolitan Water District of Southern California
- Minnesota Project
- Mississippi Chemical Corporation
- National Alliance of Independent Crop Consultants
- National Association of Conservation Districts
- National Association of Counties
- National Association of State Conservation Agencies
- National Association of State Departments of Agriculture
- National Association of State Foresters
- National Association of Wheat Growers
- National Audubon Society
- National Broiler Council
- National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture
- National Cattlemen's Beef Association
- National Corn Growers Association
- National Cotton Council
- National Council of Farmer Cooperatives
- National Farmers Union
- National Fish and Wildlife Foundation
- National FFA Organization
- National 4-H Council
- National Grain and Feed Association
- National League of Cities
- National Milk Producers Federation
- National Pork Producers Council
- National Rifle Association of America
- National Rural Water Association
- National Water Resources Association
- National Wetlands Conservation Alliance
- National Wildlife Federation
- National Young Farmers Education Association
- Natural Resources Defense Council
- The Nature Conservancy
- Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group
 - Pacific Rivers Council
 - Pheasants Forever
 - Quail Unlimited
 - Restore America's Estuaries
 - Society of American Foresters
 - Society for Range Management
 - Soil and Water Conservation Society
 - Sustainable Agriculture Coalition
 - Trout Unlimited
- United Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Association
- Water Environment Federation
- Wildlife Management Institute
- The Wildlife Society
- World Wildlife Fund