

How to document buffers for wetlands & other waters



Find the required buffer widths

Choose buffer widths according to the requirements of the city, county, or tribe that has jurisdiction in the location of the wetland or other water. Find city and county municipal codes on the Municipal Research and Services Center website (<https://mrsc.org/Research-Tools.aspx>).

For wetlands

City and county municipal codes or Critical Area Ordinances (CAOs) generally prescribe regulatory wetland buffer widths based on:

- the wetland rating.
- existing or proposed land use.
- intensity of impact.

Local jurisdictions commonly base wetland buffer widths on guidance provided in Wetland Mitigation in Washington State Part 1: Agency Policies and Guidance Version 2 (found on Washington State Department of Ecology's Interagency wetland mitigation guidance webpage - <https://ecology.wa.gov/Water-Shorelines/Wetlands/Mitigation/Interagency-guidance>) or the best available science.

For streams

Municipal codes or CAOs also list stream buffer requirements. They often base stream buffer widths on the Washington State Department of Natural Resources (DNR) stream water type classifications (found on DNR's Forest Practices Water Typing page – www.dnr.wa.gov/forest-practices-water-typing) based on flow type and fish use.

We don't operate under Forest Practices Rules intended for riparian buffer protection during logging activities. We use the Forest Practices water typing classification system to inform flow type, potential fish use, and to determine regulatory buffers.

To determine fish use, make field observations during stream assessment, gather input from local experts and tribes, and review available information including:

- Historical stream maps and information
- The Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) Statewide Integrated Fish Distribution data set (geo.wa.gov) - provides WDFW stream survey data in relation to fish use
- WSDOT's Fish Passage Site Management Application - populated by WDFW Fish Passage data

Sometimes DNR's water type mapping tool indicates non-fish use but other sources of information or field observations indicate fish use. In that case, apply the appropriate stream buffer widths for fish bearing streams prescribed in the local municipal code or CAO.

For other waters

Use the local jurisdiction's city or county municipal code or CAO to determine appropriate buffers for other jurisdictional waters such as lakes or tidal waters. Sometimes the Shoreline Master Programs designate buffer widths.

Choose the most conservative/widest buffer width

If the municipal code or CAO requires interpretation of whether the change in land use proposed by the project will result in high, moderate, or low impact levels, choose an impact level of high for transportation projects.

You can propose narrower buffers when case specific considerations emerge. If you propose narrower buffers based on moderate or low impact levels, coordinate with the local municipality prior to permit application. This will help the project avoid delays over differing expectations of buffer widths.

If there are multiple types of aquatic resources in the same area, combine buffer areas to show just one buffer line

Wetland buffers and stream (or other water) buffers often overlap. Combine (dissolve) these areas by showing only the widest applicable buffer. Use a generic "buffer" line for all buffers (Figures 1). Don't use separate buffer lines for different types of waters (Figure 2).

Any impacts to areas where wetland and stream buffers overlap would require the same compensation regardless of whether they are documented as wetland or stream buffer. Documenting the buffer one way or the other doesn't affect the mitigation outcome. We compensate for wetland and stream buffers (and other waters) in the same way (often by removing invasive species and installing appropriate native plantings).

You can deviate from this guidance when a local jurisdiction has different requirements or in other appropriate project specific cases.

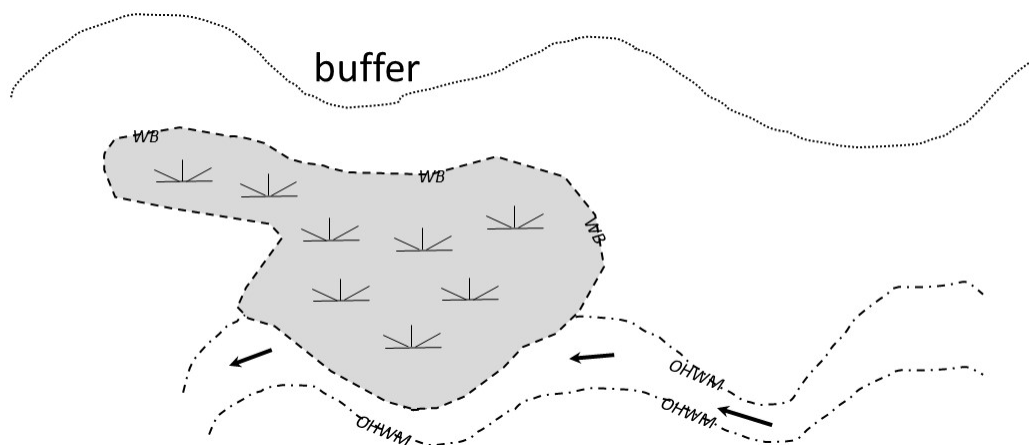


Figure 1. Preferred - A single, generic "buffer" line for all jurisdictional waters

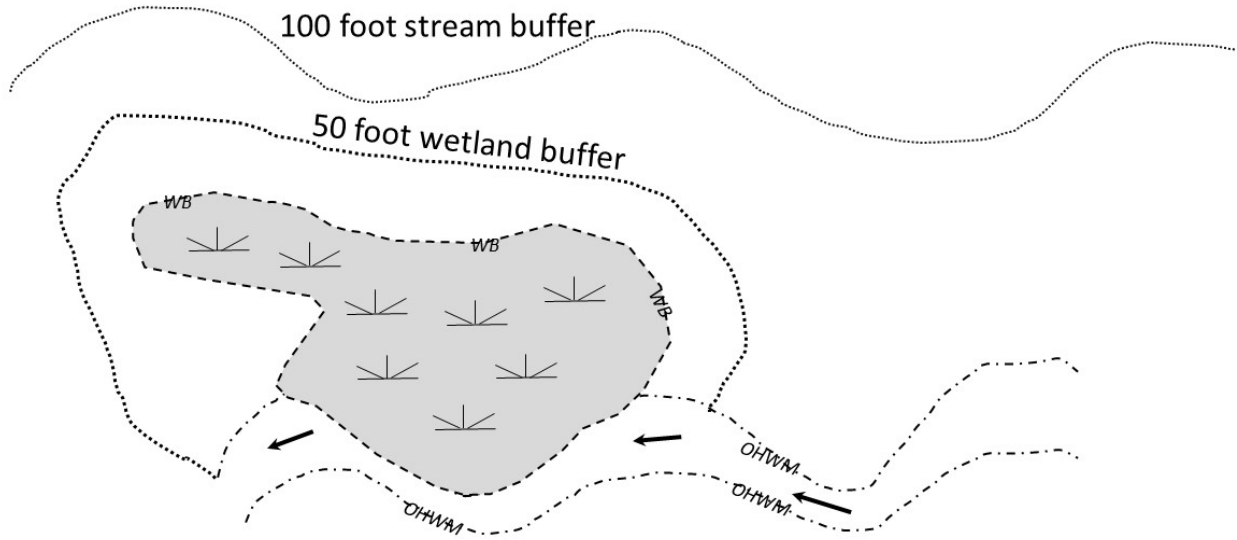


Figure 2. Not preferred - separate types and overlapping buffers

Don't extend buffers across exiting roadways

Only apply buffer areas on the same side of existing roadways as the associated wetland or other water (Figure 3). Buffer areas physically separated from a wetland or other water by an existing road can't provide functions (such as screening, noise reduction, and water quality improvement) for the sensitive area.

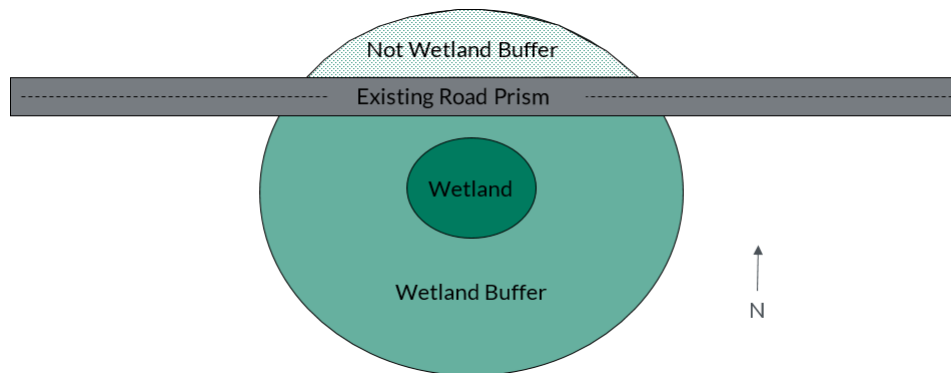


Figure 3. Only extend buffers to the same side of an existing roadway as the associated wetland or other water.

Do not extend buffers across other types of existing trails and roads including pedestrian trails and seldom used, non-paved and non-hardened roads. If paved roads, gravel roads, and railway tracks separate a portion of the regulatory buffer, end the buffer at the edge of the hardened surface or railway ballast.

Local jurisdiction or tribal buffer guidance may differ. Always review and apply the regulations in the applicable local municipal code or CAO.

If the local code or CAO does not provide clear guidance, the biologist must make a determination. Factors to consider include:

- the type of surface present
- road or track elevation - does the structure topographically separate the buffer?
- existing buffer vegetation
- type and amount of traffic using the road/track
- existing buffer functions
- quality of the existing wetland (rating, HGM, vegetation, and functions) or stream (DNR water type)

Document a clear, logical evaluation of existing conditions to support your determination.

Do extend buffers beyond proposed roadways

Ignore the area of proposed new roadways when applying buffers. Local governments regulate the buffer area existing pre-roadway and may require mitigation for impacts (Figure 4).

Impacts may include:

- Buffer area replaced by transportation infrastructure or temporarily impacted during construction.
- Buffer areas opposite the proposed roadway from the sensitive area, which become separated from the sensitive area and lose ability to provide buffering functions.

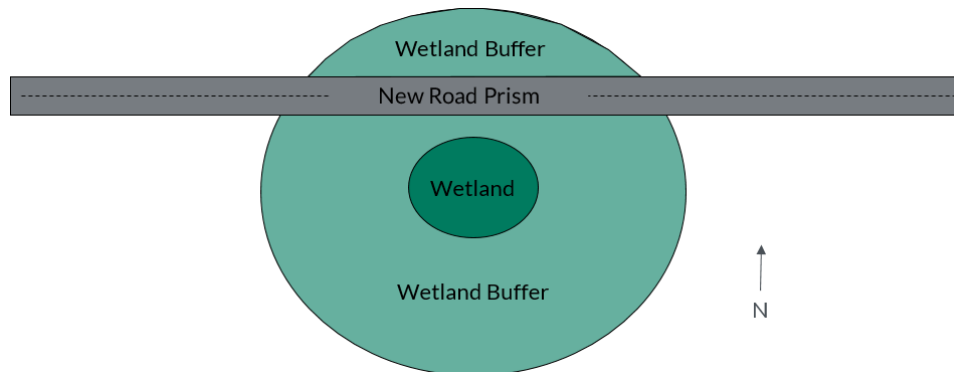


Figure 4. Buffer replaced by roadway and buffer area across the new roadway from the wetland or other water are considered buffer impacts.