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.