

SMP FACT SHEET #6

Buffers & Setbacks

Definitions

- In the SMP, a *buffer* is an area of separation between a home or other land use and the water.
- The buffer area includes vegetation such as native and deep rooting plants, trees and grasses. It may also include sand, gravel, rocks and shoreline fabric.
- Buffer widths are measured horizontally.
- A *setback* may also be applied to buffers. This is the distance that a use or development must be from the edge of a buffer to prevent activities from intruding into the buffer.

Purpose of Buffers

- Buffer vegetation provides habitat for fish & wildlife while also slowing rainwater runoff and reducing shoreline erosion.
- Buffer vegetation filters pollutants like fertilizers, pesticides, animal waste, vehicle fluids and other chemicals used around shoreline structures, before they can flow into surface water.
- Buffers help filter water before it seeps into groundwater aquifers. This is very important if you drink water from a well or from the cities of Olympia, Lacey and/or Tumwater.
- Buffers help keep water clean which makes local surface waters safer for pets, children and people to swim in, fish from and drink.
- Buffers with tall shade trees help keep water cooler, which is vital for the survival of fish, shellfish and Orcas.

Development within Buffers

- New development is generally prohibited within buffers, although buffer reductions are possible in some scenarios. Buffer reductions may require a shoreline variance permit and mitigation.
- Trails from homes to water (not applicable to commercial buildings) are permitted. Size limits apply.
- Size limits and mitigation may be required for storage structures (e.g. for kayaks).

Existing Homes & Structures within New Buffers

- Landowners will not be required to remove existing structures or landscaping within buffer zones.
- See Fact Sheet #2 for more info regarding nonconforming structures.



THURSTON COUNTY
WASHINGTON
SINCE 1852

Shoreline Master Program (SMP)

***NOT YET ADOPTED - OPEN FOR
PUBLIC COMMENT.**

ASK STAFF

Thurston County's SMP covers most shoreline building projects.

Contact Us about your site and which permits may still be required.

READ THE CODE

Title 19

**TC Current Shoreline
Codes**

FIND IT ONLINE

**Shoreline Master
Program Webpage**



Buffer Sizes: Historical, Current and Proposed

- Urban and suburban designations are being eliminated because these designations are not currently used.

Current & Proposed Shoreline Environmental Designation (SED) Buffers of the Shoreline Master Program (SMP)				
Marine Buffers in ft. (Puget Sound)				
SED	NOTES	Current	Option A	Option B
Shoreline Residential	The 2021 SMP draft proposes 2 options: A & B	50	50	85
Urban Conservancy		250	125	250
Rural Conservancy		250	150	250
Natural		250	200	250
Lakes Buffers in ft. (Fresh Water)				
SED	NOTES	Current	Option A	Option B
Shoreline Residential	The 2021 SMP draft proposes 2 options: A & B	50	50	75
Urban Conservancy		100	125	100
Rural Conservancy		100	150	125
Natural		100	200	250
Stream Buffers in ft. (Rivers & Streams)				
SED	NOTES	Current	Option A	Option B
Shoreline Residential	No changes are being proposed for Streams.	250	250	250
Urban Conservancy		250	250	250
Rural Conservancy		250	250	250
Natural		250	250	250

The chart above reflects the proposed designations. Current buffers are applied using both the SMP and Critical Areas Ordinance (CAO).

- Because Washington's Department of Ecology has new recommended designations, the current shoreline environment designations have been converted to the language of the proposed designations for consistency across years. Current buffers applied to shorelines of the state are those adopted in the 2012 CAO update, per RCW 36.70A.480, except for freshwater lakes and marine shorelines designated Shoreline Residential.
- You may apply for buffer reduction if your project meets certain criteria, such as proposing mitigation, or for situations where lots are constrained by size or topography.