



WETLANDS

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A 2012 Critical Areas Update Fact Sheet

THE ROLE OF WETLANDS

Wetlands and their buffers act as natural sponges. They help prevent flooding and erosion by absorbing floodwater and sending it slowly to rivers, streams and aquifers. The plants and soils in wetlands also filter out pollutants, such as nitrogen and phosphorous, which are found in household fertilizers and herbicides. Wetlands provide a home for many species of native plants and wildlife.

This natural cleansing capacity of wetlands can become overtaxed if too much pollution accumulates in the wetland, adversely affecting the wildlife it supports. Wetlands include bogs, marshes and swamps. Frequently, their water is visible only in the spring.



HOW DO I KNOW IF I HAVE A WETLAND ON MY PROPERTY?

Approximate locations of some critical areas in Thurston County are available in the Resource Stewardship Permit Assistance Center and may also be shown on Thurston County's GeoData website: www.geodata.org. It is important to note that maps are intended to be used as a guide and do not provide a definitive designation. You may call the Thurston County Permit Assistance Center at (360) 786-5490 or visit the Permit Assistance Center in Building 1 of the Thurston County courthouse complex, 2000 Lakeridge Drive S.W. in Olympia.

The Permit Assistance Center is open from 8 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., Monday through Friday.

Thurston County also offers a critical area review service whereby a staff member will visit a property to help identify critical areas and the possible buildable area before a property owner submits a permit application. This service, subject to fees, helps property owners develop better site plans. A more rigorous environmental review of the site plan itself is conducted during the permit-review process.

WHY HAVE BUFFERS?

A crucial way to protect habitat and water quality is to preserve a naturally vegetated buffer between human disturbances and sensitive land and water resources. Vegetated buffers help shield wetlands from polluted stormwater runoff, soil erosion, toxic chemicals, and other substances that would otherwise flow into the water. Buffers also help protect wetlands from human disturbances, such as noise and light pollution.

The roots of plants hold banks in place, stabilizing the soil and absorbing water and materials that flow across the land. Wetland buffers support both land- and water-based animals, insects and plants.

Potential amendments to the Critical Areas Ordinance seek to protect habitat and healthy functioning ecosystems in order to support viable fish and wildlife populations in Thurston County.

IMPORTANT THINGS TO KNOW

- The potential amendments to the Critical Areas Ordinance do not take a “one size fits all” approach to setting wetland buffers; rather, they use a Department of Ecology wetland rating system to help determine how wide buffers should be based on each wetland’s characteristics. (See the next page for more information about this rating system.)

The range of wetland buffers would remain the same as the existing ordinance that is now in effect (50 feet to 300 feet); however, the method of determining buffer widths would change.

Under current regulations, wetland buffer widths are fixed based on the general type of wetland and the intensity of the proposed land use. The potential amendments would determine buffer widths based on distances required to maintain water quality and habitat value, according to the Department of Ecology rating system.

Buffers for some wetlands would be narrower than they are now, and some would be wider, depending on the wetlands’ functions. Wetlands that provide the most important wildlife habitat would get the widest buffers.

- The potential amendments would exempt wetlands that are 1,000 square feet or less in size from regulation, provided the wetlands are not located within a riparian habitat area or critical area buffer, do not provide essential habitat for priority wildlife species, and are not a functional part of a “mosaic” wetland (a patchwork of interrelated wetlands).

Current regulations exempt wetlands less than 11,000 square feet in Urban Growth Areas, and less than 22,000 feet in rural areas. New scientific literature published in recent years indicates that smaller wetlands still provide important functions.

- Under certain circumstances, property owners could replace the functions of Category 3 and Category 4 wetlands that are between 1,000 and 4,000 square feet. This typically would involve submitting a mitigation plan to restore the wetland’s functions. Information about wetland categories is featured on the next page.

- Thurston County isn’t the only reviewing agency for projects that may impact wetlands. Property owners are advised to check whether reviews and/or permits are required from other state or federal agencies.
- In cases where a wetland and/or buffer contains variations in sensitivity, Thurston County could redraw the buffer to widen portions and narrow others. For example, if some areas of the wetland/ buffer were more important to wildlife habitat or vegetation than others, the buffer could be widened, and narrowed in less important areas. This provision is intended to give property owners flexibility when they apply for a building permit as well as provide greater protection for high functioning wetlands.
- If you plan to build a new home or structure, you would need to make sure the project does not encroach on a critical area or its buffer is less than 5,000 square feet of buildable area outside the buffer. If this is the case, you may be able to encroach into the outer 25% of the wetland buffer to achieve a total of 5,000 square feet of buildable area.
- If you already own a house or structure that is located in a wetland or buffer, the building could stay where it is. If a portion of the house or structure is outside the wetland or buffer, the footprint could be expanded in that area.
- In most cases, grading activities and removing native vegetation and trees would be prohibited in buffers – this is true in the existing ordinance as well. Property owners could, however, continue to maintain existing lawns, landscaping, gardens, athletic fields, playgrounds and parks, provided the work did not involve further expansion beyond the existing developed area.
- Depending on the type and extent of project that is proposed and how close it is to a wetland, a report or permit may be required. For example, if the project is proposed to be located within a wetland or buffer, a wetland mitigation plan would be required. Small projects that limit vegetation removal and impervious surfaces may not require a report. In general, the closer the project is to a wetland, the more likely it is that a report or permit would be required.

CATEGORIZING AND RATING WETLANDS

The Department of Ecology's latest Wetland Rating System for Western Washington has become the standard for most critical areas ordinances in western Washington, because it is based on rigorous scientific review and analysis conducted by the Department of Ecology over many years.

Under this approach, a scientist uses a wetland rating form supplied by the Department of Ecology. The form assigns point values based on questions such as, "Has the wetland unit been documented as a habitat for any Federally listed threatened or endangered animal or plant species?" or "Is the entire wetland unit in a topographic depression in which water ponds, or is saturated to the surface, at some time during the year?"

A scientist tallies up all the points and then, depending on the total point value, the wetland is rated as either a Category I, Category II, Category III or Category IV wetland.

- Category I wetlands (70 or more points) include wetlands that are rare, particularly sensitive to disturbance, or that are impossible to replace. Generally, these wetlands are uncommon and make up a small percentage of the wetlands in the state.
- Category II wetlands (between 51 and 69 points) provide high levels of some functions and are difficult, though not impossible, to replace.
- Category III (between 30 and 50 points) wetlands typically have been disturbed and contain less diverse wildlife habitat or are more isolated from other habitat than Category II wetlands.
- Category IV wetlands (29 points or fewer) are typically extensively altered.

The wetland category determines which uses are allowed on the property, based on how wide a buffer must be to protect habitat and water quality.

WHY USE THE DEPARTMENT OF ECOLOGY'S WETLAND RATING SYSTEM?

The Department of Ecology's Wetland Rating System is commonly used in critical areas ordinances for a variety of reasons. More than 100 local jurisdictions have already based their wetland ordinances on the Department of Ecology's guidance.

The rating system provides a way to establish buffer widths based on the quality of the individual wetland, instead of a "one size fits all" approach.

The Department of Ecology rating system also underwent a rigorous scientific review that spanned several years. The department received a federal

grant in 2002 and spent another three years crafting wetlands guidance. The department scanned more than 15,000 scientific articles and summarized another 1,000 related to protecting and managing wetlands.

Ecology's guidance underwent the most rigorous review of any wetlands-related documents produced for Washington, and was reviewed by independent scientific peers from different disciplines. The department made drafts available for public review and comment, and prepared written responses to the comments.

BEST AVAILABLE SCIENCE

The potential amendments are based on scientific information that is already deemed Best Available Science by the state and federal governments, Growth Management Hearings boards, courts, and other western Washington counties. A list of sources is posted on the "Critical Areas Update" link of www.thurstonplanning.org.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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