

Wetlands

This factsheet is one of a series developed for livestock owners with small farms. Each factsheet focuses on an area of management that will benefit the health of your animals, as well as the health of your property's natural resources.



BMP Factsheet

Winter 2015

What is a Wetland?

Wetlands are areas that, under normal circumstances, are inundated or saturated by surface or groundwater frequently enough and long enough to support water-loving plants. Wetlands do not have to be 'wet' year around and the absence of standing water does not mean the area is not a wetland. Wetlands may be forested, shrub covered, marshes, bogs or wet meadows (emergent wetlands). Some riparian areas adjacent to streams are also wetlands.

Why are Wetlands important?

Wetlands act like sponges, absorbing enormous quantities of water during heavy rain storms and periods of flooding. Wetlands provide a variety of functions including:

- Decrease peak river flows
- Aid in water storage
- Recharge groundwater
- Slow the flow of streams by gradually releasing stored water after floods and winter rains
- Provide fish and wildlife habitat

Does my property contain a Wetland?

If you think your property contains a wetland, contact Whatcom County Planning and Development Services or other qualified professional specialist who can help in determining the presence, type and boundaries of the wetland.

Whatcom County relies on the Washington State Department of Ecology Wetlands Classification and Rating System to classify wetlands and determine the width of protective buffers.

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Those wetlands that have a high level of function require the largest buffer set back. Wetlands with lower level of function require a smaller buffer.

See the Whatcom County Critical Areas Ordinance (Section 16.16.600) for specific guidance.

Wetlands Determinations and Agriculture.

Some wetlands were modified in the past for farming, and are still used for agricultural production. The wetland on your farm could be one of several different types classified under the 1985 National Food Security Act Manual (NFSAM). There are many Wetland labels under the NFSAM, the most common that may apply to agricultural landowners include:

- Prior Converted (PC)
- Farmed Wetlands (FW)
- Farmed Wetland Pastures (FWP)
- Wetlands (W)

If you think your property is a Prior Converted **(PC)**, Farmed Wetland **(FW)**, Farmed Wetland Pasture **(FWP)** or Wetland **(W)** you will need a **Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) Certified Wetlands Determination**. For more information contact a professional wetlands consultant, Whatcom County, Whatcom Conservation District or your local NRCS office for assistance.

There are certain farm activities that are allowable in Farmed Wetland or Farmed Wetland Pastures (FW/FWP) as long as the activities are part of an on-going farming operation.

Allowable activities for FW/FWP are:

- Maintain existing drainage
- Grazing
- Haying
- Cultivating

Reseeding Activities Not Permitted in FW/ FWP

- Altering Drainage
- Filling
- Clearing
- Removing woody vegetation

Activities in PC or W will require further evaluation.

All regulated wetlands require protection.

The best way to protect your wetland is to consider implementing some of the following practices.

- Fencing--Fencing livestock is one of the simplest means of protecting your wetland.
- No Touch Areas--Maintaining the natural hydrology of a wetland is the key to protecting it. Do not dig, dredge or drain your wetland without a permit.
- Planting vegetation along stream corridors and around degraded wetlands is a simple, effective way to protect and enhance your wetland. Vegetation helps retain water, stabilize soils and

provides a place for sediments to accumulate. It also provides food and shelter for wildlife.

Wetland owners who are considering any land use change should check with Whatcom County or City planning departments to find out what permits they may need.

These terms will help you understand the characteristics of different wetland types.

Forested wetland: A forest floor of saturated, mucky soil. Trees found here might include Western red cedar, Western red alder, Sitka spruce, Oregon ash, and cottonwoods.

Shrub/Scrub wetland: Saturated soil covered by dense shrubbery such as dogwood, crabapple, salmonberry, willow and hardhack.

Emergent Wetland: Areas that often look like soggy pastures of grasses, rushes, and sedges.

Bog: A thick mat of sphagnum moss encircling or covering a small lake or pond containing cranberry, labrador tea, willow, and bog laurel.

Marsh: Small lakes and ponds full of cattails, pond lilies, bull rush, yellow iris, and other similar types of plant life.

Wetlands provide some of the most diverse and productive habitat for fish and wildlife. Wetland's provide human benefits by controlling flood waters, reducing erosion, and improving water quality.

The Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program **(CREP)** now plants native trees and shrubs in degraded wetlands and wetland buffers. The costs of improvements are paid for by the program and landowners are paid rent and a signing bonus for setting aside the land for habitat improvements. Interested? Contact the Conservation District today to see if your land qualifies.