



Wetland Buffer Zones

What is a Wetland Buffer Zone?

A wetland buffer zone is an area beginning at the edge of wetland vegetation and extending to the adjacent land use. The buffer zone also contains vegetation and works to provide a protective barrier between wetland flora and fauna and neighboring land uses.



Wetland with buffer zone. Photo Courtesy Chris Speilmann, Chesapeake Bay Program

Why is it Important?

Water Quality: Much like a riparian buffer zone for a stream or river, a wetland buffer zone is a critical part of maintaining water quality because it serves as a filter for pollutants and runoff from adjacent lands. Wetlands themselves filter many toxins in our water and healthy buffer zones help to improve that function.

Habitat Protection: Wetland buffer zones also provide habitat and valuable protective screening for many amphibian, reptile and migratory bird species that use wetlands for their breeding areas.

Hydrology and Flood Mitigation: Wetlands serve much like sponges in our watersheds that help to absorb floodwaters. However, wetlands are also complex and sensitive ecosystems with plant life that can be easily damaged by fluctuating water levels. Wetlands with properly preserved buffer zones not only protect the life within the wetlands themselves, but also help to protect the surrounding lands from flooding.

Human Disturbance: As wetlands are sensitive ecosystems, buffer zones provide a shield or deterrent from human disturbances such as light, noise, and the dumping of waste and debris.

Did You Know?

A study of urban wetlands in King County, WA showed that the species diversity and breeding numbers of birds increased relative to the size and quality of wetland buffer zones.

- Washington State Department of Ecology



Sandhill Crane chick is an example of an endangered migratory bird that needs protected wetlands for habitat. Photo courtesy of US Fish & Wildlife

References & Resources

Environmental
Law Institute
*Planner's Guide to
Wetland Buffers for
Local Governments*
[www.elistore.org/Data/
products/d18_01.pdf](http://www.elistore.org/Data/products/d18_01.pdf)

Society of
Wetland Scientists
www.sws.org

US EPA
Office of Wetlands
Oceans and Watersheds
[www.epa.gov/owow/
wetlands](http://www.epa.gov/owow/wetlands)

US Fish & Wildlife
National Wetland
Inventory
www.fws.gov/nwi

USGS
National Wetlands
Research Center
www.nwrc.usgs.gov

Washington State
Dept. of Ecology
Wetland Buffers
[www.ecy.wa.gov/
pubs/92010.pdf](http://www.ecy.wa.gov/pubs/92010.pdf)

Codes & Ordinances

Wetland Buffer Widths

Belle Isle, FL—Sec. 48-52

Wetland buffers shall be required around the perimeter of all conservation areas in order to protect the water quality, water quantity, and wildlife habitat of wetlands and to prevent soil sedimentation.

- Class I conservation areas—average of 25 feet in width with a minimum width of 20 feet.
- Class II conservation areas—average of 15 feet in width with a minimum width of 10 feet.

Prohibited Activities in Wetland Buffer Zones

Charlotte County, FL—Sec. 3-5-349

A naturally vegetated upland buffer zone shall be preserved along the perimeter of all wetlands and natural surface waters. It shall be maintained in a completely natural state except for the minimum disturbance necessary to provide shoreline access to riparian property owners; the construction of utility line crossings, shoreline stabilization structures, bridges, drainage conveyances and removal of exotic vegetation.

Wetland Buffer Guidelines in Residential Developments

Darien, GA—Sec. 20-2513

An undisturbed natural vegetative buffer shall be maintained along all coastal marshlands, measured horizontally from the landward edge of the coastal marshlands, as established by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources and along all wetlands, as measured from the inland edge of the wetland, as established by the Army Corp of Engineers. The buffer shall be a variable width buffer with an average width of at least 75 feet, and a minimum width of 50 feet. All land disturbing activity is prohibited within the 75 foot buffer unless a variance is granted in accordance with City of Darien Code.

Model Ordinance Guides

Model Ordinances for Regulating Wetlands and Riparian Habitats / Stream Buffers

Association of State Wetland Managers

www.aswm.org/propub/jon_kusler/model_ordinance_051407.pdf

Model Stream / Wetland Buffer Ordinances

Hydroqual, Inc.

www.hydroqual.com/projects/riparian/Buffer_Model_Ordinance_Rhode_Island.pdf

Model Vegetated Buffer Ordinances

South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control

www.scdhec.net/environment/ocrm/pubs/docs/model.pdf

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