

NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE

VIRGINIA CONSERVATION PRACTICE STANDARD

CONSERVATION COVER

(Acre)

CODE 327

DEFINITION

Establishing and maintaining permanent vegetative cover to protect soil and water resources.

Conservation Crop Rotation (Code 328) and Cover Crop (Code 340).

PURPOSES

To reduce soil erosion and sedimentation, improve water quality, and create or enhance wildlife habitat.

CRITERIA

GENERAL CRITERIA APPLICABLE TO ALL PURPOSES

Species shall be adapted to soil, site, and climate conditions.

CONDITIONS WHERE PRACTICE APPLIES

This practice applies on land to be retired from agricultural production requiring permanent protective cover, and on other lands needing protective cover. This practice does not apply to plantings for forage production or to critical area plantings.

Species planted shall be suitable for the planned purpose and site conditions. Use of invasive species shall be avoided. Use of persistent species such as bermudagrass and fescue should be discouraged.

Seeding rates and methods shall be adequate to accomplish the planned purpose.

This practice is used for establishing cover for the retirement of land from agricultural production. This could include government program requirements for annual "set aside" or longer term such as the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). In addition, this practice could be used to meet landowner objectives to idle or retire land from production on a temporary basis.

Careful selection of planting dates and planting methods and care in handling and planting of the seed or planting stock will reduce the risk of planting failure.

Only viable, high quality, and adapted seed or planting stock shall be used.

This practice is not to be used as part of a planned rotation or to replace Virginia Conservation Practice Standards

Legume seed shall be inoculated with the proper Rhizobia bacteria before planting.

Site preparation shall be sufficient for establishment and growth of selected species.

Conservation practice standards are reviewed periodically, and updated if needed. To obtain the current version of this standard, contact the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

327-VA-2

Timing and use of equipment shall be appropriate for the site and soil conditions.

Vegetative manipulation will be accomplished by mechanical, biological or chemical methods, by prescribed burning, or a combination of the four. If burning is used alone or in combination with the other methods, the Virginia Conservation Practice Standard *Prescribed Burning (Code 338)* must be included as a planned practice.

All nutrients shall be applied following the requirements of the Virginia Conservation Practice Standard *Nutrient Management (Code 590)*.

ADDITIONAL CRITERIA FOR CREATING OR ENHANCING WILDLIFE HABITAT

Planting/Establishment

Grasses, forbs, and legumes shall be planted in mixes to encourage maximum plant diversity.

Management/Maintenance

Methods used shall be designed to protect the soil resource from erosion.

Maintenance practices and activities shall not disturb cover during the reproductive period for grassland wildlife species. These dates for Virginia are April 15 to August 15.

Maintenance measures must be adequate to control noxious weeds and other invasive species.

CONSIDERATIONS

This practice may be used to promote the conservation of wildlife species in general, including threatened and endangered species.

Where applicable, this practice may be used to conserve and stabilize archeological and historic sites.

Consider rotating management and maintenance activities (e.g. mow only one-

fourth or one-third of the area each year) throughout the managed areas to maximize spatial and temporal diversity.

Where wildlife management is an objective, the food and cover value of the planting can be enhanced by using a habitat evaluation procedure to aid in selecting plant species and providing or managing for other habitat requirements necessary to achieve the objective.

Use native species when available. Consider re-establishment of the native plant community for the site.

If a natural/volunteer cover (other than what was planted) establishes, and this cover meets the intended purpose and the landowner's objectives, the cover should be considered adequate.

Land established in conservation cover on a temporary basis for program requirements should be considered cropland until such time as decisions are made for a permanent landuse conversion. Consideration should be given in species selection to control/ removal should this land go back into agricultural production as some future time.

Species mixtures should be selected based on their ability to maintain themselves for sufficient periods of time with little maintenance.

To encourage insect food sources for grassland nesting birds, spraying or other control of noxious weeds should be done on a "spot" basis to protect forbs and legumes that benefit native pollinators and other wildlife.

PLANS AND SPECIFICATIONS

Specifications for this practice shall be prepared for each site and recorded using approved job sheets, practice instructions, or other acceptable documentation. A copy shall be provided to the landuser for their use and reference. The specifications shall include:

- Location

- Field number
 - Acreage
 - Species, rate, and method of planting
(See *Plant Establishment Guide for Virginia*)
 - Seeding dates
 - Any maintenance requirements applicable
4. Agriculture Handbook 703, Predicting Rainfall Erosion by Water: A Guide to Conservation Planning With the Revised Universal Soil Loss Equation (RUSLE).

OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE

Maintenance practices and activities should not disturb cover during the primary nesting period for grassland species. Specific date ranges for management or prohibited times that minimize impact on wildlife should be provided to the landuser. Exceptions should be considered for periodic burning or mowing when necessary to maintain the health of the plant community. Burning, haying, herbicide use, mowing or a combination of these may be needed during the establishment period to reduce competition from weed species. Noxious weeds will be controlled to prevent proliferation and spreading to adjacent fields.

Annual mowing or other treatments of the conservation cover stand for general weed control is not recommended; however, all noxious weeds such as thistle, multi-flora rose, and Johnson grass, will be controlled in compliance with local and state regulations.

Any use of fertilizers, pesticides and other chemicals shall not compromise the intended purpose.

REFERENCES

1. USDA, NRCS National Food Security Act Manual.
2. FSA Agricultural Conservation Program-1 or other current FSA documents.
3. *Plant Establishment Guide for Virginia*.

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Approved Practice Narratives

(Acre)

CODE 327

327 D1 Conservation Cover: This land will be removed from active agricultural production to reduce erosion. Method of vegetation establishment, species, and maintenance requirements are indicated on the attached job sheets.

327 D2 Conservation Cover: This land will be idled from agriculture production and enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program. All establishment and maintenance requirements listed in the CRP contract will be followed.

327 D3 Conservation Cover: This land will be idled from agriculture production as set-aside acreage for USDA feed grain program requirements. Plant cover will be established to control erosion.

327 D4 Conservation Cover: This land will be idled from agricultural production until the long term objectives are determined. Plant cover will be established to control erosion. Periodic maintenance will be carried out to control noxious weeds.

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