Vegetative Barrier, A New Conservation Buffer Practice

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In 1991 USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Agriculture Research Service began a cooperative effort to evaluate vegetative barriers as a conservation practice for sloping cropland. Vegetative barriers are defined as narrow, permanent strips of dense, perennial vegetation established in parallel rows perpendicular to dominant slope of the field. They control soil erosion by encouraging benching, retarding and reducing surface runoff, dispersing concentrated flow, reducing ephemeral gully development and entrapping sediment-borne and soluble contaminants. Results from research and field studies were used to develop a national conservation practice standard. In March 1991 the vegetative barrier practice was accepted for inclusion in the USDA-NRCS National Handbook of Conservation Practices as code 601. Stem size and density of the plant material used for this practice is crucial for sediment trapping efficiency, especially in concentrated flow areas. Switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum* L.), a native warm season perennial bunchgrass, has been shown to be a viable plant material for this practice. There are numerous switchgrass cultivars available but selection of the proper cultivar is advisable. Consult a local NRCS field office or the plant materials program (http://plant-materials.nrcs.usda.gov) for the cultivar recommended for your region.

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