



WETLAND CONSIDERATIONS

for development proposals in
UNINCORPORATED KING COUNTY

The regulations described in this fact sheet are effective as of January 1, 2005.

CRITICAL AREA PROTECTIONS

On October 25, 2004, the Metropolitan King County Council approved regulations pertaining to critical areas and public health and safety. These regulations limit development in hazard areas, such as on steep slopes or flood zones, and protect environmentally sensitive areas, such as wetlands and streams. In environmentally sensitive areas, natural buffers are crucial for maintaining water temperature, water quality and habitat. Trees and other natural land cover keep water cool and filter pollutants, which is important for the people, animals and fish that depend on these waters. Science shows that critical areas suffer when properties adjacent to them are developed.

The Growth Management Act and the King County Comprehensive Plan require King County to adopt regulations that protect the functions and values of critical areas. Wetlands are one type of critical area the county is required to regulate.

WETLAND REQUIREMENTS

Wetlands occur where the soil holds enough moisture during the growing season to affect which species of plants can grow. The *growing season* depends on the soil temperature and ranges from 7 to 12 months in King County. Even though a wetland may not appear to be wet at the surface, the soil may actually be wet under the surface during the growing season, so that the area supports predominantly water-tolerant plants. King County protects wetlands as critical areas, in accordance with the state Growth Management Act.

King County currently categorizes wetlands into one of three classes. The Critical Areas Ordinance adopts the state's new wetland rating system for western Washington. This system categorizes wetlands based on its existing functions, including water quality, hydrology, and habitat, as well as the wetland's rarity, sensitivity to disturbance, or irreplaceability.

Wetlands are categorized using the 2004 Wetland Rating System for Western Washington. The rating system includes a checklist that allows a quick evaluation of the wetland's functions. Using the rating system, an overall score and category for the wetland is determined. In addition, the rating system provides individual scores for the

wetland's water quality, hydrological, and habitat functions. These scores are used to determine the wetlands classification and the minimum buffers.

Wetlands are placed in one of four categories, according to their functions and values:

Category I wetlands are wetlands that:

- represent a unique or rare wetland type;
- are more sensitive to disturbance than most wetlands;
- are relatively undisturbed and contain ecological attributes that are impossible to replace within a human lifetime; or
- provide a high level of functions.

Category II wetlands are more common than Category I wetlands, but still require a high level of protection; are difficult, though not impossible, to replace and provide high levels of some functions.

Category III wetlands occur more frequently than Category I or II wetlands, but are difficult to replace and require a moderate level of protection. Wetlands scoring between 30-50 points generally have been disturbed in some ways, and are often less diverse or more isolated from other natural resources in the landscape than Category II wetlands. Category III wetlands are:

- wetlands with a moderate level of functions (scores between 30 -50 points); and
- interdunal wetlands between 0.1 and 1 acre in size.

Category IV wetlands have the lowest levels of functions (scores less than 30 points) and are often heavily disturbed. These are wetlands that can generally be successfully replaced and, in some cases, are able to be improved.

WETLAND BUFFERS

Buffers around wetlands protect the wetland and provide multiple ecological functions. The Critical Areas Ordinance includes limitations on new or expanded activities allowed within wetland buffers. Those activities that are allowed often require the applicant to prepare a critical areas report, including an analysis of the impact of the activity on the wetland and its buffer, as well as proposed mitigation minimizing or eliminating those impacts. These limitations do not apply to existing activities located within wetland buffers that were lawfully established prior to adoption of these regulations.

The minimum buffers vary between urban and rural areas. In the urban area, minimum buffers are based on the wetland category, the wetland type, and its habitat score.

The following table describes the urban wetland buffers:

URBAN AREA WETLAND CATEGORY AND CHARACTERISTICS	BUFFER
Category I	
Category I wetlands not meeting any of the criteria below	125 feet
Natural Heritage Wetlands	215 feet
Bog	215 feet
Estuarine	175 feet
Coastal Lagoon	175 feet
Habitat score from 29 to 36 points	225 feet
Habitat score from 20 to 28 points	150 feet
Category II	
Category II wetlands not meeting any of the criteria below	100 feet
Estuarine	135 feet
Habitat score from 29 to 36 points	200 feet
Habitat score from 20 to 28 points	125 feet
Category III	
Category III wetlands not meeting any of the criteria below	75 feet
Habitat score from 20 to 28 points	125 feet
Category IV	50 feet

Wetland buffers in rural areas are based on the same factors as those in urban areas. However, rural wetland buffers also take into consideration the type of development activity adjacent to the wetland. Development activity is classified as high, moderate, and low. Examples of high impact land uses include commercial and industrial development and active recreations sites. Moderate impact land uses include rural residential development. Low impact land uses includes forestry, passive recreation, agriculture under a farm plan, and rural residential under a rural stewardship plan.

The following table summarizes the minimum wetland buffers in rural areas.

RURAL AND RESOURCE AREA WETLAND CATEGORY AND CHARACTERISTICS	INTENSITY OF IMPACT OF ADJACENT LAND USE		
	HIGH IMPACT	MODERATE IMPACT	LOW IMPACT
Category I			
Category I wetlands not meeting any of the criteria below	100 feet	75 feet	50 feet
Natural Heritage Wetlands	250 feet	190 feet	125 feet
Bog	250 feet	190 feet	125 feet
Estuarine	200 feet	150 feet	100 feet
Coastal Lagoon	200 feet	150 feet	100 feet
Habitat score from 29 to 36 points	300 feet	225 feet	150 feet
Habitat score from 20 to 28 points	150 feet	110 feet	75 feet
Category II			
Category II wetlands not meeting any of the criteria below	100 feet	75 feet	50 feet
Estuarine	150 feet	110 feet	75 feet

RURAL AND RESOURCE AREA WETLAND CATEGORY AND CHARACTERISTICS	INTENSITY OF IMPACT OF ADJACENT LAND USE		
	HIGH IMPACT	MODERATE IMPACT	LOW IMPACT
Interdunal	150 feet	110 feet	75 feet
Habitat score from 29 to 36 points	300 feet	225 feet	150 feet
Habitat score from 20 to 28 points	150 feet	110 feet	75 feet
Category III			
Category III wetlands not meeting any of the criteria below	80 feet	60 feet	40 feet
Habitat score from 20 to 28 points	150 feet	110 feet	75 feet
Category IV	50 feet	40 feet	25 feet

Minimum buffer widths may be modified through buffer averaging. The total buffer area must not be reduced and the overall ecological function of the buffer must be at least equal to the function of the buffer before averaging.

ALLOWED USES WITHIN BUFFERS

When minimum buffers are maintained, several activities are allowed within wetland buffers.

The following activities constitute allowed alterations in wetlands and their buffers. Disturbed areas must generally be replanted with native vegetation. A critical areas report may be required to analyze the impacts of the activity and establish the appropriate mitigation to address the impacts of that activity:

- Public or private utility corridor and possibly a parallel maintenance road;
- Surface water conveyance through, or discharge into the buffer;
- Public or private trail;
- Dock, pier, moorage, float, or launch facility on an existing lot may be allowed;
- Alteration of an isolated wetland;
- Removal of noxious weeds or invasive species, such as white water lily, Himalayan blackberry, and evergreen blackberry;
- Removal of vegetation from buffers for surveying;
- Removal of hazardous trees;
- Road or underground utility crossing of a wetland;
- Reconstruction, remodeling, or replacement of existing structure or expansion of up to 1000 square feet;
- Wetland enhancement or restoration;
- Livestock manure storage facilities and associated pollution control facilities; and
- Exploratory drilling and testing for preparation of critical area reports.

OPTIONS FOR AGRICULTURE AND RURAL RESIDENTIAL PROPERTIES

The Critical Areas Ordinance provides alternative ways for rural property owners to protect the functions and values of wetlands. New or expanded agricultural activities are allowed within wetland buffers with an approved farm plan. The farm plan is prepared in consultation with the King Conservation District, which provides its services at no cost to the agriculture community. See the [Agriculture Fact Sheet](#) for more information.

RURAL RESIDENTIAL OPTIONS

With a rural stewardship plan, a rural residential property qualifies as a low impact land use, which results in small buffers. In addition, the rural stewardship plan may also make the property owner eligible for property tax reductions under the Public Benefit Rating System.

TO LEARN MORE

To learn more, access the following Web site:

<http://www.metrokc.gov/ddes/cao>