WSDOT Guidance – Wetland & Stream Buffers
Across Roadways & Buffer Overlaps
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We don’t extend regulatory wetland or stream buffers across an existing roadway in most cases. Regulatory buffers only occur on the same side of an existing roadway as the wetland or stream and do not extend to the opposite side from the sensitive area. When wetland and stream buffers overlap, the buffer overlap is only documented once as wetland buffer. Any additional stream buffer is extended beyond the wetland buffer to its jurisdictional width unless a project-specific variance is warranted.

Review the appropriate local municipal code or critical areas ordinance, regarding buffers, to determine if WSDOT’s guidance regarding buffers across roadways should be applied, or if the local jurisdiction requirements deviate from the established agency standard, and therefore would apply.

Regulatory Wetland & Stream Buffers

Local municipal codes and critical area ordinances (CAOs) typically identify regulatory buffer widths for wetlands and streams.

Wetland Buffers
City and county municipal codes or CAOs generally prescribe regulatory wetland buffer widths based on the wetland rating as well as existing or proposed land use or intensity of impact. Wetland buffer widths are commonly based on guidance provided in Wetland Mitigation in Washington State Part 1: Agency Policies and Guidance or the best available science. We generally default to an impact level of high for transportation projects, if the municipal code or CAO requires an interpretation of whether the change in land use proposed by the project will result in high, moderate, or low impact levels. Exceptions may be pursued when case specific considerations emerge. If you propose smaller buffers based on moderate or low impact levels, coordination with and concurrence from the local municipality prior to permit application will help the project avoid delays over differing expectations of buffer widths.

Stream Buffers
Stream buffer requirements are also established in municipal codes or CAO’s. They are often based on the stream water type classifications, based on flow type and fish use, prescribed in the Washington State Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Forest Practices Rules. We don’t operate under Forest Practices Rules, intended for riparian buffer protection during logging activities. We use the Forest Practices water typing classification system to determine flow type, fish use, and regulatory buffers.

During steam assessment, biologists review available information and make field observations to determine fish use, including:

- Reviewing historical stream maps and information.
- Reviewing the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) Statewide Integrated Fish Distribution data set, which provides WDFW stream survey data in relation to fish use.
- Gathering input from local experts and tribes.

If the water type mapping tool indicates non-fish use but other sources of information or field observations indicate fish use, then apply the appropriate stream buffer widths for fish bearing streams prescribed in the local municipal code or CAO.
Buffers Across Roadways

WSDOT Proposed Buffer Impacts Incurred from Placement of New Roadway

When we propose new roadway through existing wetland or stream buffer, local governments regulate the buffer on both sides of the roadway and may require mitigation for impacts (Figure 1). Impacts may include:

- Buffer areas replaced by transportation infrastructure.
- Buffer areas opposite the roadway from the sensitive area, which become separated from the sensitive area and lose ability to provide buffering functions.

![Figure 1](image)

Figure 1. New roadway through buffer: buffer replaced by roadway and areas opposite (north) the roadway from the wetland are considered buffer impacts.

WSDOT Proposed Buffer Impacts Incurred from Altering Existing Roadway

When you propose alteration of existing roadway, only consider buffer areas on the same side of the roadway as the associated wetland or stream (Figure 2). An existing roadway negates buffer functions opposite the roadway from the sensitive area. Buffer areas physically separated from a wetland or stream by an existing road are usually unable to provide buffer functions for the sensitive area such as screening, noise reduction, and/or water quality improvement. Therefore, buffers typically do not extend across an existing roadway.

Some local municipalities may specifically include consideration of wetland or stream buffers on the opposite side of the road. Review the appropriate local municipal code or CAO to determine if WSDOT’s guidance regarding buffers across roadways applies, or if the local jurisdiction requirements deviate from the established agency standard, and therefore would apply.

![Figure 2](image)

Figure 2. Altering exiting roadway through buffer: buffer impacts are only considered on the same side (south) of the roadway as the associated wetland.
Other Features to Consider

A buffer may extend across other types of existing trails and roads including pedestrian trails and seldom used, non-paved and non-hardened roads. If paved roads, gravel roads, and railway tracks separate a portion of the regulatory buffer, the functional buffer ends at the edge of the hardened surface or railway ballast. Refer to local municipal codes and CAO’s for project specific requirements.

If the local code or CAO does not provide clear guidance, the biologist must make a determination. Factors to consider include the type of surface present, road or track elevation (does the structure topographically separate the buffer), existing buffer vegetation, type and amount of traffic using the road/track, existing buffer functions, and quality of the existing wetland (rating, HGM, vegetation, and functions) or stream (DNR water type). The biologist will document a clear, logical evaluation of existing conditions to support their determination.

Wetland and Stream Buffer Overlaps

Regulatory wetland buffers and stream buffers often overlap (Figure 3; orange/green areas). Document the overlapping area as a single buffer type, defaulting to wetland buffer. Any stream buffer area beyond the regulated wetland buffer is documented as stream buffer. Deviation from this buffer guidance may be appropriate in project specific cases where a deviation is warranted or a local jurisdiction has different requirements. Any impacts to areas where wetland and stream buffer overlap would require the same mitigation regardless of whether they are documented as wetland or stream buffer. Documenting the buffer one way or the other does not affect the mitigation outcome.

Rationale for the above default: in general, any buffer impacts would be mitigated in the same way regardless of being documented as wetland buffer impacts or stream buffer impacts (often by removing invasive species and installing appropriate native plantings). Because mitigation of impacts are being addressed for one type, it not necessary to double mitigate wetland and stream buffer impacts in separate areas.

Figure 3. Two different wetland and stream buffer overlap examples: WSDOT documents buffer overlap areas as wetland buffer only.