



RIVER ALLIANCE of Wisconsin

Benefits of Vegetated Buffers

Definition

Buffers are designated areas of vegetation set between homes and the shorelines of the lakes and streams of Wisconsin. Vegetated buffers provide wildlife habitat, control erosion, infiltrate stormwater, capture nutrients, and preserve natural beauty.

Protection for Wisconsin's Waters

Increased development is occurring along Wisconsin's lakes and streams. Because this development happens right on shorelines, Wisconsin's waters can be negatively affected if care is not taken. Having vegetated buffers in place between shorelines and houses helps reduce any adverse impacts that result from more development.

Also, vegetated buffers running along the shores of lakes and streams provide wildlife habitat. This area between land and water is vital to all sorts of terrestrial and aquatic wildlife, and buffers of native vegetation would form a continuous corridor that both protects this area and provides habitat for wildlife, including fish. It is right at this connection between land and water where most fish spawning takes place.

Buffers play a dual role in protecting the water quality that keeps lakes and streams healthy. Stormwater runs off of land that has houses and hard surfaces towards the shoreline. Buffers act to trap pollutants carried in stormwater runoff, such as sediment and nutrients. Buffers also reduce the amount of stormwater by providing an area that can absorb runoff. Soils covered by native vegetation such as trees have the capacity to absorb and filter stormwater in a way that harder, more compacted surfaces such as turf grass just cannot. Plus, buffers consisting of trees preserve natural beauty. They just look good!

Current vs. Proposed Code

The proposed code provides greater protection from negative impacts on lakes and streams than the current code. Native vegetation needs

to be maintained or established in the primary buffer, or first 35 feet of the setback area. This native vegetation must be maintained and managed so that buffer areas benefit the health of Wisconsin's lakes and streams. A corridor may be maintained in the primary buffer area to maintain pedestrian access to the shoreline.

The proposed code also requires vegetation in the secondary buffer area, which is between 35 and 75 feet from the shoreline. Native vegetation is encouraged, but ground vegetation is the minimum requirement.

Details on Vegetated Buffers

Studies across the nation show that optimal buffer widths range widely depending on individual site conditions and the specific management objective. Average buffer width recommendations reported in a literature review were 138 feet for sediment filtration, 78 feet for pollution filtration, and 112 feet for erosion control (Christensen 2000). The effectiveness of buffers will vary depending on individual site conditions.

The proposed code permits:

- Primary buffer zone
 - An access corridor is permitted.
 - Lots with 200 feet or less of frontage can have an access corridor 30% of the lot width or 40 feet, whichever is less.
 - Lots with more than 200 feet of frontage can have an access corridor 20% of the lot width.
 - Counties are given discretion in determining standards for managing vegetation within the primary shoreland buffer and access corridor. Vegetation within the primary buffer may not be removed except under special circumstances (e.g. removal of exotic and invasive species, damaged vegetation, disease control, hazard control). Removed vegetation needs to be replanted by comparable native vegetation.
 - Existing lawns are permitted within the primary buffer as long as they are maintained.
- Secondary buffer zone: Vegetation within the secondary buffer may include turf grass. However, native vegetation is encouraged.