



Implementing the 2015 Buffer Legislation

Summer 2015

In June of this year, Governor Dayton signed into law a new buffer initiative aimed at enhancing protection of Minnesota's waters. The buffer initiative will help protect the state's water resources from erosion and runoff pollution by establishing roughly 110,000 acres of buffer along waterways while providing flexibility and technical support to landowners for installation and maintenance.

What is a buffer?

A buffer, also known as a riparian filter strip, is vegetated land adjacent to a stream, river, lake or wetland. Buffers help filter out phosphorus, nitrogen, and sediment, and are an important conservation practice for helping keep water clean.

Why buffers?

Studies by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency show that buffers are critical to protecting and restoring water quality and healthy aquatic life, natural stream functions and aquatic habitat due to their immediate proximity to the water.



A grass buffer strip in Redwood County.

What is required?

Under the law, buffer widths will be:

- An average of 50 feet, minimum of 30 feet, on public waters
- A minimum of 16.5 feet on public drainage systems
- Buffer recommendations for other waters will be determined by soil and water conservation districts (SWCDs)



A buffer in Olmsted County.

How will I know if buffers are required?

The Department of Natural Resources is in the process of mapping all waters subject to the new requirements. The buffer protection maps are expected to be completed by July 2016.

How will the program work?

The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources, which will oversee the new law, is working to get program details developed. Landowners may install buffers on their own at any time, or can wait until the buffer protection maps are complete in 2016. The local SWCD will provide technical assistance and answer questions about financial assistance options. Landowners also have the option of working with their SWCD to determine if other alternative practices aimed at protecting water quality can be used.



The stream on the left has insufficient buffer coverage. Areas circled in red should have a buffer.

The stream on the right has sufficient buffer coverage. 50 feet of perennial vegetation borders the entire shoreline.

Is there financial assistance available?

Yes. The 2015 Buffer Law relies on long-standing federal, state, and local programs to provide financial and technical support to landowners to implement buffers or alternative water quality practices. Landowners may use federal Farm Bill resources, such as the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Continuous CRP, and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program to get buffers installed. State resources include programs such as the Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) easement program, Conservation Cost-Share, and the Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program.

What's the timeline?

The new law specifies:

- November 1, 2017: Buffers in place on all public waters
- November 1, 2018: Buffers in place on all public drainage systems

Who is responsible for enforcement?

Counties or watershed districts will be the first point of contact when noncompliance is identified. If a landowner fails to install buffers on identified waters, penalties may include a \$500 fine.

Where do I go for more information?

Contact your local SWCD for more information about buffers and local requirements. For more information on the new buffer law, please visit: www.bwsr.state.mn.us/buffers/.