Vegetated Buffer Strip TC-31

Design Considerations

- Tributary Area
- Slope
- Water Availability
- Aesthetics

Description

Grassed buffer strips (vegetated filter strips, filter strips, and grassed filters) are vegetated surfaces that are designed to treat sheet flow from adjacent surfaces. Filter strips function by slowing runoff velocities and allowing sediment and other pollutants to settle and by providing some infiltration into underlying soils. Filter strips were originally used as an agricultural treatment practice and have more recently evolved into an urban practice. With proper design and maintenance, filter strips can provide relatively high pollutant removal. In addition, the public views them as landscaped amenities and not as stormwater infrastructure. Consequently, there is little resistance to their use.

Targeted Constituents

✓	Sediment	■
✓	Nutrients	●
✓	Trash	▲
✓	Metals	■
✓	Bacteria	●
✓	Oil and Grease	■
✓	Organics	▲

Legend ***(Removal Effectiveness)***

● Low ■ High

▲ Medium

California Experience

Caltrans constructed and monitored three vegetated buffer strips in southern California and is currently evaluating their performance at eight additional sites statewide. These strips were generally effective in reducing the volume and mass of pollutants in runoff. Even in the areas where the annual rainfall was only about 10 inches/yr, the vegetation did not require additional irrigation. One factor that strongly affected performance was the presence of large numbers of gophers at most of the southern California sites. The gophers created earthen mounds, destroyed vegetation, and generally reduced the effectiveness of the controls for TSS reduction.

Advantages

- Buffers require minimal maintenance activity (generally just erosion prevention and mowing).

- If properly designed, vegetated, and operated, buffer strips can provide reliable water quality benefits in conjunction with high aesthetic appeal.

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- Flow characteristics and vegetation type and density can be closely controlled to maximize BMP effectiveness.

- Roadside shoulders act as effective buffer strips when slope and length meet criteria described below.

Limitations

- May not be appropriate for industrial sites or locations where spills may occur.

- Buffer strips cannot treat a very large drainage area.

- A thick vegetative cover is needed for these practices to function properly.

- Buffer or vegetative filter length must be adequate and flow characteristics acceptable or water quality performance can be severely limited.

- Vegetative buffers may not provide treatment for dissolved constituents except to the extent that flows across the vegetated surface are infiltrated into the soil profile.

- This technology does not provide significant attenuation of the increased volume and flow rate of runoff during intense rain events.

Design and Sizing Guidelines

- Maximum length (in the direction of flow towards the buffer) of the tributary area should be 60 feet.

- Slopes should not exceed 15%.

- Minimum length (in direction of flow) is 15 feet.

- Width should be the same as the tributary area.

- Either grass or a diverse selection of other low growing, drought tolerant, native vegetation should be specified. Vegetation whose growing season corresponds to the wet season is preferred.

Construction/Inspection Considerations

- Include directions in the specifications for use of appropriate fertilizer and soil amendments based on soil properties determined through testing and compared to the needs of the vegetation requirements.

- Install strips at the time of the year when there is a reasonable chance of successful establishment without irrigation; however, it is recognized that rainfall in a given year may not be sufficient and temporary irrigation may be required.

- If sod tiles must be used, they should be placed so that there are no gaps between the tiles; stagger the ends of the tiles to prevent the formation of channels along the strip.

- Use a roller on the sod to ensure that no air pockets form between the sod and the soil.

- Where seeds are used, erosion controls will be necessary to protect seeds for at least 75 days after the first rainfall of the season.

Performance

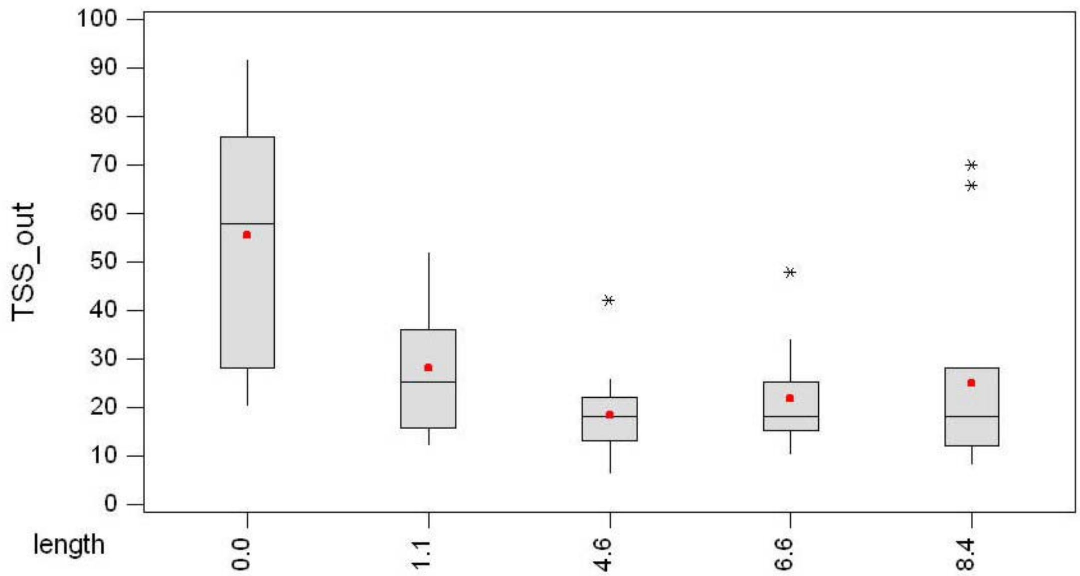
Vegetated buffer strips tend to provide somewhat better treatment of stormwater runoff than swales and have fewer tendencies for channelization or erosion. Table 1 documents the pollutant removal observed in a recent study by Caltrans (2002) based on three sites in southern California. The column labeled "Significance" is the probability that the mean influent and effluent EMCs are not significantly different based on an analysis of variance.

The removal of sediment and dissolved metals was comparable to that observed in much more complex controls. Reduction in nitrogen was not significant and all of the sites exported phosphorus for the entire study period. This may have been the result of using salt grass, a warm weather species that is dormant during the wet season, and which leaches phosphorus when dormant.

Another Caltrans study (unpublished) of vegetated highway shoulders as buffer strips also found substantial reductions often within a very short distance of the edge of pavement. Figure 1 presents a box and whisker plot of the concentrations of TSS in highway runoff after traveling various distances (shown in meters) through a vegetated filter strip with a slope of about 10%. One can see that the TSS median concentration reaches an irreducible minimum concentration of about 20 mg/L within 5 meters of the pavement edge.

Table 1 Pollutant Reduction in a Vegetated Buffer Strip

Constituent	Mean EMC		Removal %	Significance
	Influent (mg/L)	Effluent (mg/L)		P
TSS	119	31	74	<0.000
NO_3-N	0.67	0.58	13	0.367
TKN-N	2.50	2.10	16	0.542
Total N[a]	3.17	2.68	15	-
Dissolved P	0.15	0.46	-206	0.047
Total P	0.42	0.62	-52	0.035
Total Cu	0.058	0.009	84	<0.000
Total Pb	0.046	0.006	88	<0.000
Total Zn	0.245	0.055	78	<0.000
Dissolved Cu	0.029	0.007	77	0.004
Dissolved Pb	0.004	0.002	66	0.006
Dissolved Zn	0.099	0.035	65	<0.000



Filter strips also exhibit good removal of litter and other floatables because the water depth in these systems is well below the vegetation height and consequently these materials are not easily transported through them. Unfortunately little attenuation of peak runoff rates and volumes (particularly for larger events) is normally observed, depending on the soil properties. Therefore it may be prudent to follow the strips with another practice than can reduce flooding and channel erosion downstream.

Siting Criteria

The use of buffer strips is limited to gently sloping areas where the vegetative cover is robust and diffuse, and where shallow flow characteristics are possible. The practical water quality benefits can be effectively eliminated with the occurrence of significant erosion or when flow concentration occurs across the vegetated surface. Slopes should not exceed 15 percent or be less than 1 percent. The vegetative surface should extend across the full width of the area being drained. The upstream boundary of the filter should be located contiguous to the developed area. Use of a level spreading device (vegetated berm, sawtooth concrete border, rock trench, etc) to facilitate overland sheet flow is not normally recommended because of maintenance considerations and the potential for standing water.

Filter strips are applicable in most regions, but are restricted in some situations because they consume a large amount of space relative to other practices. Filter strips are best suited to treating runoff from roads and highways, roof downspouts, small parking lots, and pervious surfaces. They are also ideal components of the "outer zone" of a stream buffer or as pretreatment to a structural practice. In arid areas, however, the cost of irrigating the grass on the practice will most likely outweigh its water quality benefits, although aesthetic considerations may be sufficient to overcome this constraint. Filter strips are generally impractical in ultra-urban areas where little pervious surface exists.

Some cold water species, such as trout, are sensitive to changes in temperature. While some treatment practices, such as wet ponds, can warm stormwater substantially, filter strips do not are not expected to increase stormwater temperatures. Thus, these practices are good for protection of cold-water streams.

Filter strips should be separated from the ground water by between 2 and 4 ft to prevent contamination and to ensure that the filter strip does not remain wet between storms.

Additional Design Guidelines

Filter strips appear to be a minimal design practice because they are basically no more than a grassed slope. In general the slope of the strip should not exceed 15fc% and the strip should be at least 15 feet long to provide water quality treatment. Both the top and toe of the slope should be as flat as possible to encourage sheet flow and prevent erosion. The top of the strip should be installed 2-5 inches below the adjacent pavement, so that vegetation and sediment accumulation at the edge of the strip does not prevent runoff from entering.

A major question that remains unresolved is how large the drainage area to a strip can be. Research has conclusively demonstrated that these are effective on roadside shoulders, where the contributing area is about twice the buffer area. They have also been installed on the perimeter of large parking lots where they performed fairly effectively; however much lower slopes may be needed to provide adequate water quality treatment.

The filter area should be densely vegetated with a mix of erosion-resistant plant species that effectively bind the soil. Native or adapted grasses, shrubs, and trees are preferred because they generally require less fertilizer and are more drought resistant than exotic plants. Runoff flow velocities should not exceed about 1 fps across the vegetated surface.

For engineered vegetative strips, the facility surface should be graded flat prior to placement of vegetation. Initial establishment of vegetation requires attentive care including appropriate watering, fertilization, and prevention of excessive flow across the facility until vegetation completely covers the area and is well established. Use of a permanent irrigation system may help provide maximal water quality performance.

In cold climates, filter strips provide a convenient area for snow storage and treatment. If used for this purpose, vegetation in the filter strip should be salt-tolerant (e.g., creeping bentgrass), and a maintenance schedule should include the removal of sand built up at the bottom of the slope. In arid or semi-arid climates, designers should specify drought-tolerant grasses to minimize irrigation requirements.

Maintenance

Filter strips require mainly vegetation management; therefore little special training is needed for maintenance crews. Typical maintenance activities and frequencies include:

- Inspect strips at least twice annually for erosion or damage to vegetation, preferably at the end of the wet season to schedule summer maintenance and before major fall run-off to be sure the strip is ready for winter. However, additional inspection after periods of heavy run-off is most desirable. The strip should be checked for debris and litter and areas of sediment accumulation.

- Recent research on biofiltration swales, but likely applicable to strips (Colwell et al., 2000), indicates that grass height and mowing frequency have little impact on pollutant removal;

consequently, mowing may only be necessary once or twice a year for safety and aesthetics or to suppress weeds and woody vegetation.

- Trash tends to accumulate in strip areas, particularly along highways. The need for litter removal should be determined through periodic inspection but litter should always be removed prior to mowing.

- Regularly inspect vegetated buffer strips for pools of standing water. Vegetated buffer strips can become a nuisance due to mosquito breeding in level spreaders (unless designed to dewater completely in 48-72 hours), in pools of standing water if obstructions develop (e.g. debris accumulation, invasive vegetation), and/or if proper drainage slopes are not implemented and maintained.

Cost

Construction Cost

Little data is available on the actual construction costs of filter strips. One rough estimate can be the cost of seed or sod, which is approximately 30¢ per ft^2 for seed or 70¢ per ft^2 for sod. This amounts to between $13,000 and $30,000 per acre of filter strip. This cost is relatively high compared with other treatment practices. However, the grassed area used as a filter strip may have been seeded or sodded even if it were not used for treatment. In these cases, the only additional cost is the design. Typical maintenance costs are about $350/acre/year (adapted from SWRPC, 1991). This cost is relatively inexpensive and, again, might overlap with regular landscape maintenance costs.

The true cost of filter strips is the land they consume. In some situations this land is available as wasted space beyond back yards or adjacent to roadsides, but this practice is cost-prohibitive when land prices are high and land could be used for other purposes.

Maintenance Cost

Maintenance of vegetated buffer strips consists mainly of vegetation management (mowing, irrigation if needed, weeding) and litter removal. Consequently the costs are quite variable depending on the frequency of these activities and the local labor rate.

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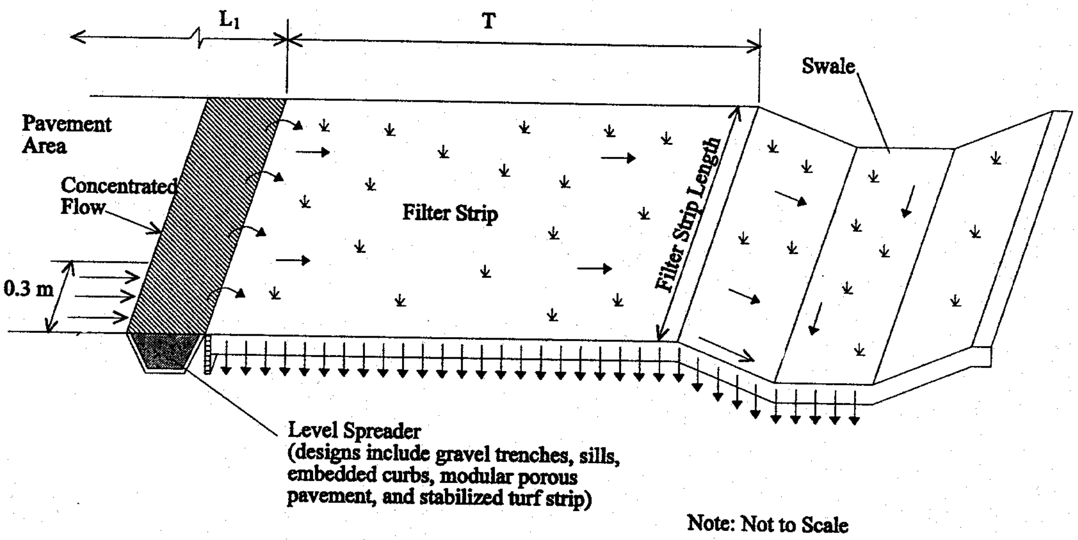

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Swale
Pavement Area
Concentrated Flow
Filter Strip
Filter Strip Length
0.3 m
Level Spreader
(designs include gravel trenches, sills, embedded curbs, modular porous pavement, and stabilized turf strip)
Note: Not to Scale