

***The Raritan Watershed Agricultural Committee's Position on Riparian
Buffers on Agricultural Land
In the Raritan River Basin***

Background

Nonpoint source pollution and the issues of how to prevent it from impacting our surface water supplies has been the subject of much debate throughout the nation. In certain areas of the country, much attention has been focused on the contribution of nonpoint source pollutants from agricultural lands. In New Jersey where the land use trend is toward urbanization and suburbanization, the source of nonpoint source pollutants is not easily determined. Agriculture within the Raritan River Basin is quite diverse. Grain production, orchards, livestock, vegetable production, sod farms and nursery operations are important examples of this diversity.

Riparian Buffers Defined

A riparian buffer is a forested or herbaceous area between a stream, lake or other water body and the adjacent land that maintains the water quality and ecological health of stream channels and shorelines by acting as a living filter. The width of a buffer will depend on the land use, soils and topography surrounding the buffer, the objective of the buffer project, and the overall health and quality of the adjacent water body.

Current Conditions

Efforts to reduce nonpoint source pollution have proven that riparian buffers are a valuable tool. When used on agricultural land in combination with other best management practices, riparian buffers have been shown to reduce nutrient and sediment runoff, lower stream water temperature, provide wildlife habitat and flood control. In certain circumstances, increased buffer width has shown an increased benefit for all the factors listed above.

The implementation of riparian buffers has not been widespread in the Raritan Basin. Several conditions exist which prevent landowners from adopting these practices on agricultural land. Of major concern to agricultural producers is the financial impact these practices will have on their production, loss of acreage, and cost of implementing these practices. Because the enhancement of stream buffers on agricultural land is in the public's interest, funding must be available to help offset the cost of changing production practices to assure water quality. Financial compensation is essential, especially when considering the true cost, which includes not only the installation of the buffer, but also the lost income opportunity from the land now dedicated to the riparian buffer, the increased cost associated with maintenance and management of this buffer area, and the potential for increased wildlife damage. Education is also needed to help the agricultural community understand what management options exist and how best to implement them. This can come in the form of buffer demonstration sites which would exhibit the various best management practices for stream corridors by using twilight meetings, newsletters, etc.

Buffers on Agricultural Land

When discussing buffers on agricultural land, the size of the buffer is the most frequently debated issue. Literature on the subject of riparian buffers has one common theme, namely that buffers are not one-size-fits-all. Depending on the desired environmental benefits, the buffer width and character can vary greatly. For example, water temperature modification can be achieved with a minimum 10- to 15-foot buffer, whereas flood control benefits are in the 75- to 200-foot range. While there are many environmental and social benefits derived by the presence of riparian buffers, the agricultural community will focus on those benefits that are compatible with the dual ideals of resource protection and the continuance of economically viable agricultural operations. The Raritan Watershed Agricultural Committee has set the following benefits as the primary objective for buffer installation on agricultural land:

- Sediment control
- Nutrient removal
- Streambank stabilization
- Water temperature modification

Heavy crop losses occur in the Raritan watershed from deer and geese damage. Enhancing habitat that attracts nuisance wildlife is a major concern of the agricultural community. Therefore, the width of riparian buffers on agricultural land should not exceed NRCS technical standards for water quality, unless the landowner's primary goal is wildlife habitat enhancement for other wildlife species.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service, Field Office Technical Guide specifies three Best Management Practice standards that can be applied to stream corridor management that would meet the objectives of the agricultural community. They are: 1) Vegetative Filter Strip, 2) Riparian Herbaceous Cover, and 3) Riparian Forest Buffer. Additional Best Management Practices covering specific agricultural operations may also apply. Each standard includes information on installation and maintenance of the buffer practice.

Depending on the site-specific conditions, one or more of these practices may apply. These best management practices should be applied on all perennial watercourses. Perennial watercourses are defined as those mapped as perennial on either the US Geological Survey or the detailed map sheets in the County Soil Surveys published by the US Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service, unless site-specific information to the contrary is present. In trout production and trout maintenance areas where water temperature is critical it is recommended that a riparian forest buffer be installed whenever feasible. NRCS Best Management Practices may also be applicable on intermittent streams and must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

Summary

The Raritan Watershed Agricultural Committee recognizes the importance of protecting and improving water quality. We also realize that the implementation of Best Management Practices from the farmstead to the stream is key to achieving improved water quality. We support the installation of stream corridor management practices on agricultural land as outlined above. In all cases, the economic viability of the agricultural operation must be considered first and foremost, and Best Management Practices must be flexible in their use and implementation.

This position paper is endorsed through motion duly made and passed by:

The _____
(Organization)

On _____
(Resolution Date)

Signed by _____
(Name & Title)