



Wetlands

A Skagit County Critical Areas Ordinance Fact Sheet

The *Skagit County Critical Areas Ordinance (CAO)* regulates development affecting wetlands; fish and wildlife habitat conservation areas including streams; aquifer recharge areas; frequently flooded areas; and geologically hazardous areas.

This CAO fact sheet is one in a series, which describes the above-listed types of environmentally critical areas

protected by Skagit County under Title 14, Chapter 14.24, *Critical Areas Ordinance*, effective June 13, 1996. This has been provided to you as general information and is not intended as a substitute for the actual codes or regulations. For more information, contact Skagit County Planning & Development Services at (360) 336-9410 or visit our website at www.skagitcounty.net.

What is a wetland?

Wetlands are those areas inundated or saturated by surface or ground water at a frequency and duration sufficient to support vegetation typically adapted for life in saturated soil conditions.

Wetlands can be identified by three characteristics:

- Hydric soils—soils saturated with water.
- Water—the presence of standing water or saturated soils within the top 12” – 18” of the surface during the growing season.
- Plants—water tolerant or water dependent plant species.

They generally include, but are not limited to ponds, marshes, bogs, wet meadows, and swamps.

Why are wetlands important?

Wetlands perform a variety of functions that are important to the environmental and economic well-being of Skagit County. Wetlands:

- Control flooding by acting as natural reservoirs for incoming storm flow;
- Improve water quality by filtering contaminants;

- Maintain stream flows by gradually releasing stored water after floods and wet seasons;
- Recharge groundwater;
- Stabilize shoreline areas;
- Provide fish and wildlife habitat;
- Create places for recreation, education, scientific study, and aesthetic appreciation.

Does my property contain a wetland?

To assist you in determining if your property may contain a wetland, you may contact Skagit County Planning & Development Services. They can provide you with inventoried wetlands maps.

Since not all County wetlands were identified in the wetland inventory, these maps should be used as a general guide for property owners. Your property may still contain a wetland that requires protection under the County's *Critical Areas Ordinance*. In this case, a qualified wetland specialist should visit your property to determine the presence, type, extent and boundaries of any wetland(s). You may contact Skagit County for a list of qualified wetlands specialists.

Wetland Classification

Skagit County relies on the 2004 Washington State Department of Ecology's Wetlands Rating System for Western Washington to classify wetlands.

The County's wetlands are classified into four categories base upon their size, function and value. Briefly, Category I wetlands receive the highest protection since they are the most biologically complex and contain the highest functions and values performed by wetlands. Conversely, Category IV wetlands receive considerably less protection, and are often minimal in size, perform limited functions, and provide less value than the other categories.

With few exceptions, wetlands are regulated, by local, state and/or federal government agencies.

Buffers and Building Setbacks

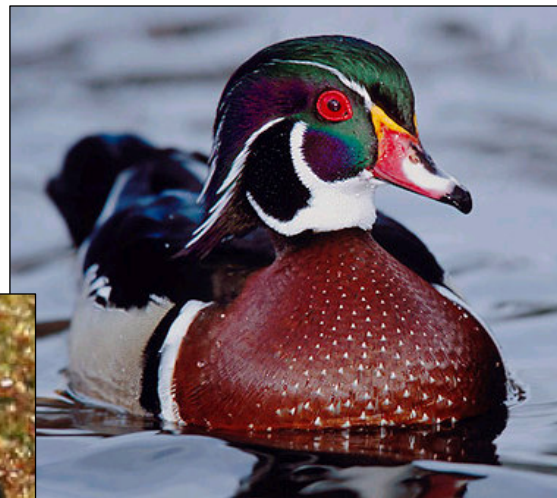
Buffers are undisturbed areas of native vegetation which surround wetlands or other critical areas. In Skagit County, no activity is allowed within a regulated wetland or its buffer, unless otherwise specified.

Buffer widths range in size according to the wetland category and adjacent land uses:

- Category I Wetland
150 ft – 300 ft
- Category II Wetland
150 ft – 300 ft
- Category III Wetland
75 ft – 150 ft
- Category IV Wetland
25 ft – 50 ft

Under certain conditions, Skagit County allows modification of these buffer widths by granting agreements for buffer averaging or decreases in buffer widths. The County also has the authority to require larger buffer zone widths when necessary to protect particular wetland functions and values as well as corridor between wetlands and other nearby critical areas.

Existing structures within a wetland or the buffer may be maintained or remodeled. Replacement structures or expansion of existing structures will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis.



Wetland Protection

Protecting wetlands requires public education, involvement, and cooperation. You can learn more about them by visiting wetland sites and familiarizing yourself with local wetlands ordinances.

If your property contains a wetland, there are ways you can protect it. Avoid dumping, draining, or filling near your wetland. Even yard waste can degrade a wetland's functions and values. Wetland animals need the benefits provided by a buffer zone. Consider marking or fencing off a buffer area around your wetland. Learn about wetland regulations and additional ways to preserve and enhance your wetland by contacting Skagit County Planning & Development Services, or the Washington State Department of Ecology

Other Restrictions and Provisions

Examples of activities which are subject to the standards contained in the CAO and other applicable federal, state, and local ordinances include:

- Forest practices, Class IV General, and Conversion Option Harvest Plans (COHPs);
- Livestock restrictions;
- Land divisions and land use permits;
- Building and clearing activities adjacent to wetland areas; and
- Draining or placing fill in or near a wetland.

For specific information you may contact Skagit County Critical Areas staff at (360) 336-9410 or read the Critical Areas Ordinance online at www.skagitcounty.net.

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