

Because wetlands play such a crucial ecological role by improving water quality, recharging groundwater, and reducing flooding, any impacts or disturbances to wetlands are heavily regulated by local jurisdictions. In order for these regulations to apply, a wet area must meet the legal definition of a wetland and fulfill various size criteria. WA Department of Ecology (DOE) has determined that wetlands of any size are valuable, but most jurisdictions have minimum size requirements. Wetlands that meet the legal definition are called “jurisdictional” wetlands.

Legally, in order to be considered a wetland, hydrology, hydric soils and wetland vegetation all must be present according to a method developed by the Army Corps of Engineers. Wetland hydrology means that soils are saturated within 12” of the surface for long enough (14 days) during the growing season to promote establishment of vegetation that is adapted to saturated soils (inundation is not required). A full hydrological report of an area would describe any saturated or inundated area, how long the area is inundated or saturated throughout the year and more. However, this is a time intensive process that requires several site visits. Instead, most wetland reports rely on hydrologic indicators such as high water marks or driftlines, or watermarks on the bark of woody plants. Sometimes, groundwater monitoring is necessary.

Hydric soils are soils that develop under anaerobic (low oxygen) conditions associated with saturation or inundation and must be present within 12–18” of the soil surface. Some hydric soils contain a large amount of organic matter, because anaerobic conditions slow the decay of plant material. Because of this, hydric soils are often dark in coloration. Hydric soils may also display gleying (bluish or grey coloration), mottling (orange, yellow or red-brown patches, spots or streaks) or have a rotten egg odor. Anaerobic conditions create these features.

The US Fish and Wildlife Service compiles the *National List of Plant Species that Occur in Wetlands*. Plants on this list are classified according to the likelihood of each to occur in a wetland. “Obligate wetland” plant species have a high likelihood (99% of the time) of growing in wetlands, occurring almost nowhere else. “Facultative wetland” plant species are more likely (67–99% of the time) to occur in wet areas, but also occur elsewhere. “Facultative” plant species are equally likely to occur in either wet or upland habitats. The wetland vegetation criterion is satisfied when greater than 50% of the plant species present are Facultative or wetter.

A wetland delineation outlines the boundary of the wetland. If a buffer is required, the width of the buffer is measured out from this line. The boundary line is drawn on a map of the area and flagged on the ground. This process involves reviewing existing wetland inventory maps compiled by agencies, walking the site, surveying the vegetation present and digging sample soil pits. The wetland functions are then rated according to a method developed by WA DOE. The wetland rating is used to assign a category of one through four. The wetland category and regulations (which vary according to each jurisdiction) then determine the width of the buffer. See our information sheet on ‘Wetland Buffers’ for more information on common buffer sizes and allowable actions within.