

# Vegetated Filter Strip (Grass Filter)



**Minimum Measure: Post Construction Stormwater Management in New Development and Redevelopment**

**Subcategory: Filtration**



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## Description

Vegetated filter strips (grassed 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 filtering out sediment and other pollutants, 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. One challenge associated with filter strips, however, is that it is difficult to maintain sheet flow, so the practice may be "short circuited" by concentrated flows, receiving little or no treatment.



## Applicability

Filter strips can be difficult to use in some locations 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, and very small parking lots. They are also ideal components of the "outer zone" of a stream buffer, or as pretreatment to a structural practice (such as a water quality detention pond).

## Design Considerations

Drainage Area - Typically, filter strips are used to treat very small drainage areas. The limiting design factor, however, is not the drainage area the practice treats but the length of flow leading to it. As stormwater runoff flows over the ground's surface, it changes from sheet flow to concentrated flow. Rather than moving uniformly over the surface, the concentrated flow forms rivulets which are slightly deeper and cover less area than the sheet flow. When flow concentrates, it moves too rapidly to be effectively treated by a grassed filter strip. Furthermore, this concentrated flow can lead to scouring. As a rule, flow concentrates within a maximum of 75 feet for impervious surfaces, and 150 feet for pervious surfaces (CWP, 1996). Using this rule, a filter strip can treat one acre of impervious surface per 580-foot length.

Slope - Filter strips should be designed on slopes between 2 and 6 percent. Greater slopes than this would encourage the formation of concentrated flow.

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Filter strips appear to be a minimal design practice because they are basically no more than a grassed slope. However, some design features are critical to ensure that the filter strip provides some minimum amount of water quality treatment.

- A pea gravel diaphragm should be used at the top of the slope. The pea gravel diaphragm (a small trench running along the top of the filter strip) serves two purposes. First, it acts as a pretreatment device, settling out sediment particles before they reach the practice. Second, it acts as a level spreader, maintaining sheet flow as runoff flows over the filter strip.
- The filter strip should be designed with a pervious berm of sand and gravel at the toe of the slope. This feature provides an area for shallow ponding at the bottom of the filter strip. Runoff ponds behind the berm and gradually flows through outlet pipes in the berm.
- The filter strip should be at least 25 feet long to provide water quality treatment.
- Designers should choose a grass that can withstand relatively high velocity flows and both wet and dry periods.
- Both the top and toe of the slope should be as flat as possible to encourage sheet flow and prevent erosion.

## Limitations

Filter strips have several limitations related to their performance and space consumption:

- The practice has not been shown to achieve high pollutant removal.
- Filter strips require a large amount of space, typically equal to the impervious area they treat, making them often infeasible in urban environments where land prices are high.
- If improperly designed, filter strips can allow mosquitos to breed.
- Proper design requires a great deal of finesse, and slight problems in the design, such as improper grading, can render the practice ineffective in terms of pollutant removal.

## Maintenance Considerations

Filter strips require similar maintenance to other vegetative practices. This maintenance includes: removing sediment build-up within the bottom when it has accumulated to 25% of the original capacity, inspection of pea gravel diaphragm for clogging and remove built-up sediment, etc. Maintenance is very important for filter strips, particularly in terms of ensuring that flow does not short circuit the practice.

## Effectiveness

Structural stormwater management practices can be used to achieve four broad resource protection goals. These include flood control, channel protection, ground water recharge, and pollutant removal. The first two goals, flood control and channel protection, require that a stormwater practice be able to reduce the peak flows of relatively large storm events (at least 1- to 2-year storms for channel protection and at least 10- to 50-year storms for flood control). Filter strips do not have the capacity to detain these events, but can be designed with a bypass system that routes these flows around the practice entirely.

Filter strips can provide a small amount of ground water recharge as runoff flows over the vegetated surface and ponds at the toe of the slope. In addition, it is believed that filter strips can provide modest pollutant removal. Studies from agricultural settings suggest that a 15-foot-wide grass buffer can achieve a 50 percent removal rate of nitrogen, phosphorus, and sediment, and that a 100-foot buffer can reach closer to 70 percent removal of these constituents.