

WETLANDS

WHAT IS A WETLAND?

There are many different types of wetlands. They can be part of a stream or lake system, or they may be in a forested area. Bogs are wetlands with soil that developed very slowly to create peat. Estuaries and marshes are wetlands and wet meadows may be wetlands, even areas covered with shrubs like salmonberry and crabapple may be wetlands. Some wetlands are obvious; others are difficult to determine. A wetland is periodically flooded, whether from a tide, stream, rain, or from human intervention. It may only be flooded for a few weeks per year and still be a wetland. For an area to be determined a wetland, the following three criteria must each be present:

Wetland vegetation - Only specific plant species can handle the oxygen deprived conditions present in wetlands. Some plants are normally only found in wetlands (cattails, skunk cabbage, slough sedge, and water lilies), while others can be found both inside and outside of wetlands (red alder, salmonberry, western red cedar). Generally, an area must have a predominance of plants species suited for living in saturated soil conditions.

Wetland soils - Wetland soils are poorly drained and develop certain characteristics due to the presence of water and absence of oxygen. These soils can be identified by being darker than non wetland soils, or grey with rusty streaks or spots. Specific hydric soil indicators must be present for an area to be determined to have wetland soils.

Wetlands hydrology - A wetland must have water at or near the soil's surface at some time of the year. The area does not have to be wet all the time, but must have water at or near the soil surface (typically within 12-inches) continually for at least 2 – 3 weeks per year. A wetland may be ponded year round, or just a seasonally soggy area.

Under normal circumstances ALL THREE of the above wetland indicators must be present in order for an area to be considered a wetland. The technical basis for making wetland determinations can be found in the 1987 US Army Corps of Engineers Wetland Delineation Manual and its companion, the Washington Department of Ecology Wetlands Delineation Manual. Every jurisdiction in the State uses these same guidelines, ensuring consistency from area to area.

HOW CAN I DETERMINE IF I HAVE A WETLAND ON MY PROPERTY?

Some wetlands in Island County are mapped, but not all. The County also maintains property-specific wetland files. You may call or visit to ask if wetlands are indicated on your property (be sure to have your parcel number) and staff can help you review the materials that are available.

The **Island County Wetland Identification Guide** can also be used as a tool to aid property owners in determining if a wetland may be present on or within the vicinity of their property. The Wetland ID Guide was developed as a non-technical handbook for landowners proposing residential development and includes instructions on how to evaluate hydrology, soils and vegetation. If it is determined that a wetland is present, the guide also describes how to collect the information necessary for staff to make a determination on the type (category) of wetland and required buffer.

In addition to the Wetland ID guide, the Planning and Community Development Department has developed a process whereby a property owner may apply for a critical area (wetland) determination to be made for their property (see Preliminary Critical Areas Determination DIB). The application process requires the submittal of a completed wetland Field Indicators Worksheet (see Wetland ID Guide) and a fee. The applicant is provided a written determination regarding the presence/absence of wetlands on their property, wetland category and range of potential buffers sizes (dependent upon land use intensity). The application does not result in a formal wetland delineation, but is intended to provide the property owner with the information necessary for them to make informed decisions about the use of their property.

Another alternative for property owners is to hire a qualified independent wetland specialist to prepare a formal wetland report. Such a report may be provided with applications for residential development and are required for all non-residential (commercial) developments. Property owners should be sure to verify that their private consultant meets the minimum standards as a qualified wetland specialist (see ICC 17.02A - Definitions).

Regardless of which technique above is used to aid in determining if wetlands are present, **it is the responsibility of property owner to ensure compliance with the regulations pertaining to wetlands and to include any information regarding the presence of such features on any application materials submitted to the County.**

WHY ARE WETLANDS PROTECTED?

Wetlands provide a variety of important functions and values including,

- Stormwater Management – Specialized soils act like a sponge to slow stormwater runoff allowing water to be slowly released into connecting channels and estuaries and providing time to for infiltration back into our aquifers which provide our drinking water supply.
- Water Purification – Wetland soils, vegetation and the microbes and other organisms they support act like a filter, trapping and actually detoxify pollutants which find their way into our water through runoff and wind.
- Habitat – Wetlands provide a rich habitat that in Island County help to sustain at least 150 species of birds, 44 mammals, 8 amphibians, 6 reptiles and over 4 species of salmonids, as well as over 249 plant species.
- Rural Character – Wetlands provide open spaces that add to the rural character and scenic vistas of Island County. When healthy, these features maintain property values, provide incentives for tourism and sustain recreational activities on our shorelines and in the waters surrounding Whidbey and Camano Islands.

BUFFERS

Vegetated buffers around wetlands help to protect their functions by:

- Providing the initial filtering of sediments and other pollutants from water runoff
- Downed wood and other organic matter provide nutrients for the plants and animals and shelter from weather and predators
- Provide shade which aids in maintaining water temperatures and the microclimate plants and animals need for survival

Buffers are an important means of wetland protection and should consist of undisturbed vegetated areas that surround the wetland. Due to the varying sensitivity of wetlands and their diverse locations within the landscape, buffers sizes vary significantly. The type of wetland, adjacent land use intensity and quality of existing buffer are the main keys to determining wetland buffer size when a development activity is being proposed.

DEVELOPMENT AND PERMITS

If you are planning a land disturbing activity such as clearing, grading or some other form of development (e.g. constructing a residence or other structure) and a wetland and/or wetland buffer exists on your property, some form of approval needs to be obtained from the Department of Planning and Community Development.

However, given the varying levels of review possible and the complicated nature of wetland science, it is always safest to contact an appropriate staff member in the Planning and Community Development Department **prior to performing any land disturbing activities in or around (up to 300-feet) from a known wetland.** Critical Areas staff can advise you on the current regulations and help ensure that time consuming and costly restoration is not required in the event of an inadvertent wetland or buffer disturbance.

CONTACT STAFF

Island County's wetland regulations are a complex section of the Critical Areas Ordinance. It is recommended that any property owners planning a development activity (including minor clearing, grading or similar activities) contact our Critical Areas Planners prior to initiating any work. Additionally, this DIB is intended only to serve as a general overview of the regulations and we encourage you to contact us if you have any further questions.

ISLAND COUNTY PLANNING AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

PHONE: (360) 679-7339 ■ from Camano (360) 629-4522 ■ from S. Whidbey (360) 321-5111

FAX: (360) 679-7306 ■ P. O. Box 5000, Coupeville, WA 98239-5000

121N East Camano Drive, Camano Island, WA 98292 ■ Phone (360) 387-7913 ■ FAX (360) 387-6161

www.islandcounty.net/planning