

Steele County Buffer Ordinance

An ordinance providing for the protection of natural resources through the establishment of vegetative buffers along public waters and public drainage ditches.

The Steele County Board of Commissioners does hereby ordain:

1.0 STATUTORY AUTHORIZATION AND POLICY

- 1.1 **Statutory authorization.** This buffer ordinance is adopted pursuant to the authorization and policies contained in Minn. Stat. §103F.48, the Buffer Law, and the County planning and zoning enabling legislation in Minn. Stat. chapter 394.
- 1.2 **Purpose and intent.** It is the purpose and intent of the County to:
 - (a) Provide for riparian vegetated buffers and water quality practices to achieve the following purposes:
 - (1) Protect state water resources from erosion and runoff pollution;
 - (2) Stabilize soils, shores and banks; and
 - (3) Protect or provide riparian corridors.
 - (b) Coordinate the implementation and enforcement of the water resources riparian protection requirements of Minn. Stat. §103F.48 with the shoreland management rules and ordinances adopted under the authority of Minn. Stat. §103F.201 to 103F.227 and the management of public drainage systems established under Minn. Stat. chapter 103E where applicable; and
 - (c) Provide efficient and effective direction to landowners and protection of surface water quality and related land resources.

2.0 JURISDICTION

- 2.1 **Jurisdiction.** The provisions of this ordinance apply to all waters, including public drainage systems for which the County is not the drainage authority under Minn. Stat. chapter 103E, shown on the buffer protection map.

3.0 SEVERABILITY

- 3.1 **Severability.** If any section, clause, provision, or portion of this ordinance is adjudged unconstitutional or invalid by a court of competent jurisdiction, the remainder of this ordinance shall not be affected thereby.

4.0 DEFINITIONS

- 4.1 **Definitions.** Unless specifically defined below, words or phrases used in this ordinance shall be interpreted to give them the same meaning they have in common usage and to give this ordinance its most reasonable application. For the purpose of this ordinance, the words "must" and "shall" are mandatory and not permissive. All distances, unless otherwise specified, are measured horizontally.

4.1.1 **"APO"** means the administrative penalty order issued pursuant to Minn. Stat. §103F.48, subd. 7 and Minn. Stat. §103B.101, subd. 12a.

4.1.2 **"Buffer"** has the meaning provided in Minn. Stat. §103F.48, subd. 1(c).

- 4.1.3 **"Buffer protection map"** has the meaning provided in Minn. Stat. §103F.48, subd. 1(d) and which are available on the Department of Natural Resources website.
- 4.1.4 **"BWSR"** means the Board of Water and Soil Resources.
- 4.1.5 **"County"** means Steele County.
- 4.1.6 **"Cultivation farming"** means farming practices that disturb root or soil structure or that impair the viability of perennial vegetation due to cutting or harvesting near the soil surface.
- 4.1.7 **"Drainage authority"** has the meaning provided in Minn. Stat. §103E.005, subd. 9.
- 4.1.8 **"Landowner"** means the holder of the fee title, the holder's agents or assigns, any lessee, licensee, or operator of the real property and includes all land occupiers as defined by Minn. Stat. §103F.401, subd. 7 or any other party conducting farming activities on or exercising control over the real property.
- 4.1.9 **"Parcel"** means a unit of real property that has been given a tax identification number maintained by the County.
- 4.1.10 **"Public drainage system"** has the meaning given to "drainage system" in Minn. Stat. §103E.005, subd. 12.
- 4.1.11 **"Local water management authority"** has the meaning provided in Minn. Stat. §103F.48, Subd. 1(g).
- 4.1.12 **"Normal water level"** means the level evidenced by the long-term presence of surface water as indicated directly by hydrophytic plants or hydric soils or indirectly determined via hydrological models or analysis.
- 4.1.13 **"Notification of Non-compliance"** written compliance determination by the SWCD that a parcel or parcels do not meet the requirements of Minn. Stat. §103F.48 and the Steele County Buffer Ordinance.
- 4.1.14 **"SWCD"** means the Steele County Soil and Water Conservation District.
- 4.1.15 **"Validation of Compliance"** written compliance determination by the SWCD that a parcel or parcels meet the requirements of Minn. Stat. §103F.48 and the Steele County Buffer Ordinance.

5.0 BUFFER STANDARDS

- 5.1 **Buffer width.** Except as provided in subsection 5.4 and 5.5, a landowner owning property adjacent to a water body identified on the buffer protection map must establish and maintain a buffer area as follows:
 - (a) For waters shown on the buffer protection map requiring a fifty (50) foot width buffer, the buffer width will be fifty (50) foot average and thirty (30) foot minimum width as provided in Minn. Stat. §103F.48, subd. 3 and as measured according to subsection 4.2; and
 - (b) For waters shown on the buffer protection map requiring a sixteen and a half (16.5) foot minimum width buffer, the buffer width will be sixteen and a half (16.5) feet as provided in Minn. Stat. §103F.48, subd. 3 and as measured according to subsection 4.2.

5.2 Measurement.

- (a) The width of any required buffer on land adjacent to a water requiring a fifty (50) foot average width and a thirty (30) foot minimum width buffer shall be measured from the top or crown of the bank. Where there is no defined bank, measurement must be from the edge of the normal water level as provided in Minn. Stat. §103F.48, subd. 3(c).
- (b) The width of any required buffer on land adjacent to a water requiring a sixteen and a half (16.5) foot minimum width buffer shall be measured in the same manner as for measuring the vegetated grass strip under Minn. Stat. §103E.021, subd. 6~~1~~ as provided in Minn. Stat. §103F.48, subd. 3(c).

5.3 **Use of buffer area.** Except as provided in sections 5.4 and 5.5 a buffer as defined in this ordinance may not be put to any use, included but not limited to cultivation farming, which would remove or prevent the permanent growth of perennial vegetation.

5.4 **Exemptions.** The requirement of section 5.1 does not apply to land that is exempted from the water resources riparian protection requirements under Minn. Stat. §103F.48, subd. 5.

5.5. **Alternative practices.** As provided in Minn. Stat. §103F.48, subd. 3(b) an owner of land that is used for cultivation farming may demonstrate compliance with subsection 5.1 by establishing and maintaining an alternative riparian water quality practice(s), or combination of structural, vegetative, and management practice(s) which provide water quality protection comparable to the water quality protection provided by a required buffer as defined in sections 5.1 to 5.3. The adequacy of any alternative practice allowed under this section shall be based on:

- (a) the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG);
- (b) common alternative practices adopted and published by BWSR;
- (c) practices based on local conditions approved by the SWCD that are consistent with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG); or
- (d) other practices adopted by BWSR.

5.6 **Nonconformity.** Where the provisions of any statute, other ordinance or regulation imposes greater restrictions than this ordinance, the provisions of such shall be controlling. The continuation of nonconformities provided for by Minn. Stat. §394 and §462 shall not apply to compliance with this ordinance and Minn. Stat. §103F.48.

6.0 COMPLIANCE DETERMINATIONS

6.1 **Compliance determinations.** Compliance with the buffer requirements set forth in section 5 will be determined by the SWCD on a parcel by parcel basis.

- (a) The compliance status of each bank, or edge of a waterbody on an individual parcel will be determined independently.
- (b) The County will consult with the SWCD who may evaluate any available documentation, and/or inspect the buffer and/or alternative practices to determine the compliance status of the parcel. Upon completion of the evaluation and/or inspection, the SWCD shall issue a written Compliance Determination to the County and the landowner. A Notification of Noncompliance shall also be sent to the BWSR.

- (c) If the SWCD does not issue such a Notification of Noncompliance, the County will not pursue a compliance or enforcement action under Minnesota Statutes §103F.48 and section 6.

6.2 **Corrective Action Notice.** On receipt of an SWCD Notification of Noncompliance, the County will issue the landowner a Corrective Action Notice that will:

- (a) include a list of corrective actions needed to come into compliance with the requirements of Minn. Stat. §103F.48;
- (b) provide a timeline for complying with the corrective action notice; and
- (c) include a statement that failure to respond to this Notice may result in the assessment of criminal, civil or administrative penalties.

6.3 **Combined Corrective Action Notice / APO.** The County may send the landowner a combined Corrective Action Notice and APO as provided in section 7.3 so long as the combined Notice/APO includes all the required elements of both.

6.4 **Corrective Action Notice Delivery.** The County shall transmit the corrective action notice by either personal service to the landowner or by depositing the same in the U.S. Mail. If service is made by U.S. mail, the document is deemed received three business days after the notice was placed in the U.S. mail. Failure of actual receipt of a corrective action notice that has either been personally served or served by depositing the same in the U.S. Mail shall not be deemed a defense in an enforcement proceeding under section 7. The County shall also send a copy of the Notice to the SWCD and BWSR.

6.5 **Correction Action Notice Modification.** At any time after receipt of a corrective action notice, the landowner may supply information to the County in support of a request to modify a corrective action or the timeline for compliance. On the basis of any such submittal or at its own discretion, the County may make a written modification to the Corrective Action Notice or timeline for compliance. Any such modification of a correction action notice compliance will be served on the landowner in the manner provided for in section 6.4. The County shall provide the SWCD and BWSR a written copy of any modification made pursuant to this provision.

6.6 **Compliance Verification.** At any time after receiving the correction action notice, the landowner may provide documentation of compliance to the County. The documentation shall be reviewed by the County who will consult with the SWCD. Compliance will be verified by site visit, re-inspection, examination of documentation, or other means as may be reasonable under the facts of the case. The county will provide written determination documenting whether the noncompliance has been fully corrected.

7.0 ENFORCEMENT

7.1 **Failure to comply with a corrective action notice.**

The County may, at its own discretion, elect to pursue the failure to comply with a corrective action notice either criminally or through an administrative penalty order as set forth herein.

- (a) Failure to comply with a corrective action notice issued under section 5 constitutes a misdemeanor and shall be punishable as defined by law. Each day the violation occurs or continues shall constitute a separate offense.

- (b) The County may issue an APO as provided for in Minn. Stat. §§103F.48, subd. 7(b) and (c) and 103B.101, subdivision 12a to a landowner who has failed to take the corrective action set forth in the corrective action notice.

7.2 Statute of limitations. Any criminal enforcement action undertaken pursuant to Section 7.1 of this ordinance must be undertaken within two years after the alleged violation was discovered or reasonably should have been discovered by the County. According to Minn. Stat. §541.07, the County has two years in which to commence an APO action after the date the violation is discovered. The goal is to complete the action as soon as reasonably practical, recognizing that situations for which data must be gathered, field investigations must be completed and/or modeling must be performed will require adequate time to complete the work and communicate with the landowner involved.

7.3 Administrative Penalty Order (APO). An APO shall be served on the landowner together with a copy of the corrective action notice or alternatively the County may serve the landowner with a combined Corrective Action Notice and APO so long as the combined Notice/APO includes all the elements of both. Service is effective either by personal service or by depositing the documents set forth herein in the U.S. Mail. Any penalty assessed in the APO shall continue to accrue until the violation is corrected as provided in the Corrective Action Notice and APO.7.2 APO.

The APO shall include, at a minimum:

- i. The facts constituting the violation of the riparian protection and water quality practices requirements set forth in this section 4.0 of this ordinance or Minn. Stat. §103F.48;
- ii. The specific statute and/or ordinance section(s) that has/have been violated;
- iii. A written description of prior efforts to work with the landowner to resolve the violation;
- iv. The amount of the penalty to be imposed;
- v. The date the penalty will begin to accrue;
- vi. The date that payment of the penalty is due;
- vii. The date by which all or part of the penalty may be forgiven if the landowner has/have complied with the Corrective Action Notice; and
- viii. A statement of the landowner's right to appeal the APO.

A copy of the APO must be sent to the SWCD and BWSR.

7.4 APO Penalties.

- (a) Initial violation. The penalty for a landowner on a single parcel that has not previously been the subject of an APO issued by the County shall be:
 - i. \$0 for 11 months after issuance of the Corrective Action Notice;
 - ii. \$100 per parcel per month for the first six (6) months (180 days) following the time period in i; and
 - iii. \$200 per parcel per month after six (6) months (180 days) following the time period in ii.
- (b) Repeat violation. The penalty for a landowner on a single parcel that has previously been the subject of an APO issued by the County shall be:
 - i. \$100 per parcel per day for 180 days after issuance of the Corrective Action Notice; and
 - ii. \$300 per parcel per day for after 180 days following the time period in i.

(c) Ongoing penalty assessment. Any penalty assessed under this section shall continue until the corrective action notice has been satisfied.

7.5 Right to appeal. Within 30 days after receipt of the APO, a landowner may appeal the terms and conditions of an APO issued by a County to BWSR as provided in Minn. Stat. §103F.48, subd. 9. The appeal must be in writing and must include a copy of the APO that is being appealed, the basis for the appeal and any supporting evidence. The appeal may be submitted personally, by U.S. mail, or electronically, to the Executive Director of BWSR.

7.6 Penalty due. Unless the landowner appeals the APO as provided in Section 7.5 the penalty specified in the APO becomes immediately due and payable to the County as set forth in the APO. If, however, the landowner submits written documentation that the violations has been corrected prior to the time the penalty becomes due and payable, the County shall verify compliance and adjust the penalty to an amount the landowner would have owed had the penalty been paid on the date the landowner submitted written documentation of compliance. Written documentation of compliance may include a written validation of compliance issued by the SWCD.

However, if the County determines the violation was not fully corrected, the County shall notify the landowner by issuing a written letter of determination and depositing it in the U.S. Mail. Any determination sent by U.S. Mail shall be deemed received three business days after the letter of determination has been deposited in the U.S. Mail. The landowner shall have an additional 20 days after receipt of the letter of determination to pay the penalty or the time period specified in the APO as issued, whichever is later. The penalty will continue to accrue until the violation is corrected as provided in the Corrective Action Notice and APO.

7.7 Referral for collection of penalty. All penalties and interest assessed under an APO must be paid by the landowner within the time specified in this section. All payments shall be made payable to the County. Any penalty or interest not received in the specified time may be collected by the County using any lawful means.

7.8 Reporting and documentation. *The County shall maintain all records for any potential violation of the riparian protection and water quality practices requirements. Said records may include but are not limited to the following:*

- i. The cause of the violation;*
- ii. The magnitude and duration of the violation;*
- iii. Documentation showing whether the violation presents an actual or imminent risk to public health and safety, or the natural resources of the state;*
- iv. A record of past violations;*
- v. Efforts by the SWCD, County, Watershed District or BWSR to assist the responsible party or parties to become compliant, including written and oral communications with the responsible party or parties; and*
- vi. Past and present corrective action efforts by the responsible party or parties.*