United States Environmental Protection Agency | Office of Water Washington, D.C. | 832-F-99-006 September 1999

EPA

Storm Water Technology Fact Sheet
Vegetated Swales

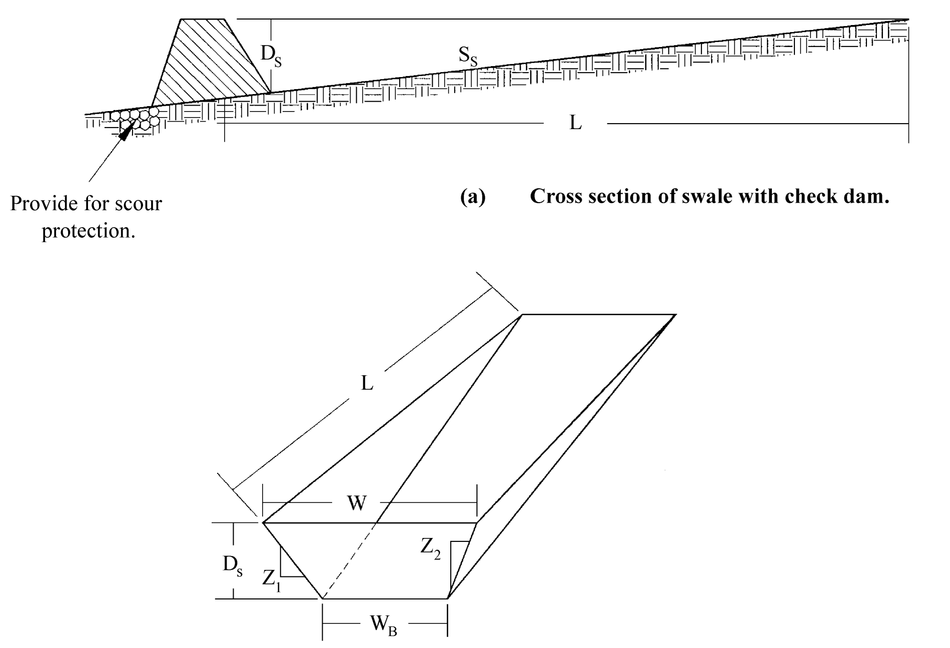
DESCRIPTION

A vegetated swale is a broad, shallow channel with a dense stand of vegetation covering the side slopes and bottom. Swales can be natural or manmade, and are designed to trap particulate pollutants (suspended solids and trace metals), promote infiltration, and reduce the flow velocity of storm water runoff. A typical design is shown in Figure1.

Vegetated swales can serve as part of a storm water drainage system and can replace curbs, gutters and storm sewer systems. Therefore, swales are best suited for residential, industrial, and commercial areas with low flow and smaller populations.

APPLICABILITY

Vegetated swales can be used wherever the local climate and soils permit the establishment and maintenance of a dense vegetative cover. The feasibility of installing a vegetated swale at a



(a) **Cross section of swale with check dam.**

(b) **Dimensional view of swale impoundment area.**

Notation:
L = Length of swale impoundment area per check dam (ft)
D_S = Depth of check dam (ft)
S_S = Bottom slpe of swale (ft/ft)
W = Top width of check dam (ft)
W_B = Bottom width of check dam (ft)
$Z_{1\&2}$ = Ratio of horizontal to vertical change in swale side slope (ft/ft)

Source: NVPDC, 1996.

FIGURE 1 EXAMPLE OF A VEGETATED SWALE

particular site depends on the area, slope, and perviousness of the contributing watershed, as well as the dimensions, slope, and vegetative covering employed in the swale system.

Vegetated swales are easy to design and can be incorporated into a site drainage plan. While swales are generally used as a stand-alone storm water Best Management Practice (BMP), they are most effective when used in conjunction with other BMPs, such as wet ponds, infiltration strips, wetlands, etc.

While vegetated swales have been widely used as storm water BMPs, there are also certain aspects of vegetated swales that have yet to be quantified. Some of the issues being investigated are whether their pollutant removal rates decline with age, what effect the slope has on the filtration capacity of vegetation, the benefits of check dams, and the degree to which design factors can enhance the effectiveness of pollutant removal.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

Swales typically have several advantages over conventional storm water management practice, such as storm sewer systems, including the reduction of peak flows; the removal of pollutants, the promotion of runoff infiltration, and lower capital costs. However, vegetated swales are typically ineffective in, and vulnerable to, large storms, because high-velocity flows can erode the vegetated cover.

Limitations of vegetated swales include the following:

- They are impractical in areas with very flat grades, steep topography, or wet or poorly drained soils.
- They are not effective and may even erode when flow volumes and/or velocities are high.
- They can become drowning hazards, mosquito breeding areas, and may emit odors.
- Land may not be available for them.
- In some places, their use is restricted by law: many local municipalities prohibit vegetated swales if peak discharges exceed 140 liters per second (five cubic feet per second) or if flow velocities are greater than 1 meter per second (three feet per second).
- They are impractical in areas with erosive soils or where a dense vegetative cover is difficult to maintain.

Negative environmental impacts of vegetated swales may include:

- Leaching from swale vegetation may increase the presence of trace metals and nutrients in the runoff.
- Infiltration through the swale may carry pollutants into local groundwater.
- Standing water in vegetated swales can result in potential safety, odor, and mosquito problems.

DESIGN CRITERIA

Design criteria for implementation of the vegetated swales are as follows:

Location

Vegetated swales are typically located along property boundaries along a natural grade, although they can be used effectively wherever the site provides adequate space. Swales can be used in place of curbs and gutters along parking lots.

Soil Requirements

Vegetated swales should not be constructed in gravelly and coarse sandy soils that cannot easily support dense vegetation. If available, alkaline soils and subsoils should be used to promote the removal and retention of metals. Soil infiltration rates should be greater than 0.2 millimeters per second (one-half inch per hour); therefore, care must be taken to avoid compacting the soil during construction.

Vegetation

A fine, close-growing, water-resistant grass should be selected for use in vegetated swales, because increasing the surface area of the vegetation exposed to the runoff improves the effectiveness of the swale system. Pollutant removal efficiencies vary greatly depending on the specific plants involved, so the vegetation should be selected with pollution control objectives in mind. In addition, care should be taken to choose plants that will be able to thrive at the site. Examples of vegetation appropriate for swales include reed canary grass, grass-legume mixtures, and red fescue.

General Channel Configuration

A parabolic or trapezoidal cross-section with side slopes no steeper than 1:3 is recommended to maximize the wetted channel perimeter of the swale. Recommendations for longitudinal channel slopes vary within the existing literature. For example, Schueler (1987) recommends a vegetated swale slope as close to zero as drainage permits. The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (1991) recommends that the channel slope be less than 2 percent. The Storm Water Management Manual for the Puget Sound Basin (1992) specifies channel slopes between 2 and 4 percent. This manual indicates that slopes of less than 2 percent can be used if drain tile is incorporated into the design, while slopes greater than 4 percent can be used if check dams are placed in the channel to reduce flow velocity.

Flows

A typical design storm used for sizing swales is a six-month frequency, 24-hour storm event. The exact intensity of this storm must be determined for your location and is generally available from the U.S. Geological Survey. Swales are generally not used where the maximum flow rate exceeds 140 liters/second (5 cubic feet per second).

Sizing Procedures

The width of the swale can be calculated using various forms of the Manning equation. However, this methodology can be simplified to the following rule of thumb: the total surface area of the swale should be one percent of the area (500 square feet for each acre) that drains to the swale.

Unless a bypass is provided, the swale must be sized both to treat the design flows and to pass the peak hydraulic flows. However, for the swale to treat runoff most effectively, the depth of the storm water should not exceed the height of the grass.

Construction

The subsurface of the swale should be carefully constructed to avoid compaction of the soil. Compacted soil reduces infiltration and inhibits growth of the grass. Damaged areas should be restored immediately to ensure that the desired level of treatment is maintained and to prevent further damage from erosion of exposed soil.

Check Dams

Check dams can be installed in swales to promote additional infiltration, to increase storage, and to reduce flow velocities. Earthen check dams are not recommended because of their potential to erode. Check dams should be installed every 17 meters (50 feet) if the longitudinal slope exceeds 4 percent.

PERFORMANCE

The literature suggests that vegetated swales represent a practical and potentially effective technique for controlling urban runoff quality. While limited quantitative performance data exists for vegetated swales, it is known that check dams, slight slopes, permeable soils, dense grass cover, increased contact time, and small storm events all contribute to successful pollutant removal by the swale system. Factors decreasing the effectiveness of swales include compacted soils, short runoff contact time, large storm events, frozen ground, short grass heights, steep slopes, and high runoff velocities and discharge rates.

Conventional vegetated swale designs have achieved mixed results in removing particulate pollutants. A study performed by the Nationwide Urban Runoff Program (NURP) monitored three grass swales in the Washington, D.C., area and found no significant improvement in urban runoff quality for the pollutants analyzed. However, the weak performance of these swales was attributed to the high flow velocities in the swales, soil compaction, steep slopes, and short grass height. Another project in Durham, NC, monitored the performance of a carefully designed artificial swale that received runoff from a commercial parking lot. The project tracked 11 storms and concluded that particulate concentrations of heavy metals (Cu, Pb, Zn, and Cd) were reduced by approximately 50 percent. However, the swale proved largely ineffective for removing soluble nutrients. A conservative estimate would say that a properly designed vegetated swale may achieve a 25 to 50 percent reduction in particulate pollutants, including sediment and sediment-attached phosphorus, metals, and bacteria. Lower removal rates (less than 10 percent) can be expected for dissolved pollutants, such as soluble phosphorus, nitrate, and chloride. Table 1 summarizes some pollutant removal efficiencies for vegetated swales.

TABLE 1 EFFECTIVENESS OF DESIGN SWALES

Pollutant	Median % Removal
Total Suspended Solids	81
Oxygen Demanding Substances	67
Nitrate	38
Total Phosphorus	9
Hydrocarbons	62
Cadmium	42
Copper	51
Lead	67
Zinc	71

The effectiveness of vegetated swales can be enhanced by adding check dams at approximately 17 meter (50 foot) increments along their length (See Figure 1). These dams maximize the retention time within the swale, decrease flow velocities, and promote particulate settling. Structures to skim off floating debris may also be added to the swales. Finally, the incorporation of vegetated filter strips parallel to the top of the channel banks can help to treat sheet flows entering the swale.

OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE

The useful life of a vegetated swale system is directly proportional to its maintenance frequency. If properly designed and regularly maintained, vegetated swales can last indefinitely.

The maintenance objectives for vegetated swale systems include keeping up the hydraulic and removal efficiency of the channel and maintaining a dense, healthy grass cover. Maintenance activities should include periodic mowing (with grass never cut shorter than the design flow depth), weed control, watering during drought conditions, reseeding of bare areas, and clearing of debris and blockages. Cuttings should be removed from the channel and disposed in a local composting facility. Accumulated sediment should also be removed manually to avoid the transport of resuspended sediments in periods of low flow and to prevent a damming effect from sand bars. The application of fertilizers and pesticides should be minimal.

Another aspect of a good maintenance plan is repairing damaged areas within a channel. For example, if the channel develops ruts or holes, it should be repaired utilizing a suitable soil that is properly tamped and seeded. The grass cover should be thick; if it is not, reseed as necessary.

Any standing water removed during the maintenance operation must be disposed to a sanitary sewer at an approved discharge location. Residuals (e.g., silt, grass cuttings) must be disposed in accordance with local or State requirements.

COSTS

Vegetated swales typically cost less to construct than curbs and gutters or underground storm sewers. Schueler (1987) reported that costs may vary from $16-$30 per linear meter ($4.90 to $9.00 per linear foot) for a 4.5 meter (15-foot) wide channel (top width).

The Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (SEWRPC, 1991) reported that costs may vary from $28 to $164 per linear meter ($8.50 to $50.00 per linear foot) depending upon swale depth and bottom width. These cost estimates are higher than other published estimates because they include the cost of activities (such as clearing, grubbing, leveling, filling, and sodding) that may not be included in other published estimates. Construction costs depend on specific site considerations and local costs for labor and materials. Table 2 shows the estimated capital costs of a vegetated swale.

Annual costs for maintaining vegetated swales are approximately $1.90 per linear meter ($0.58 per linear foot) for a 0.5 meter (1.5-foot) deep channel, according to SEWRPC (1991). Average annual operating and maintenance costs of vegetated swales can be estimated using Table 3.

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TABLE 2 ESTIMATED CAPITAL COST OF A 1.5- FOOT DEEP, 10-FOOT-WIDE GRASSED SWALES[a]

Component	Unit	Extent	Unit Cost			Total Cost		
			Low	Moderate	High	Low	Moderate	High
Mobilization / Demobilization-Light	Swale	1	$107	$274	$441	$107	$274	$441
Site Preparation								
Clearing[b]...............	Acre	0.5	$2,200	$3,800	$5,400	$1,100	$1,900	$2,700
Grubbing[c].............	Acre	0.25	$3,800	$5,200	$6,600	$950	$1,300	$1,650
General Excavation[d]...........	Yd^3	372	$2.10	$3.70	$5.30	$781	$1,376	$1,972
Level and Till[e]........	Yd^2	1,210	$0.20	$0.35	$0.50	$242	$424	$605
Sites Development								
Salvaged Topsoil Seed, and Mulch[f]..	Yd^2	1,210	$0.40	$1.00	$1.60	$484	$1,210	$1,936
Sod[g].....................	Yd^2	1,210	$1.20	$2.40	$3.60	$1,452	$2,904	$4,356
Subtotal	--	--	--	--	--	$5,116	$9,388	$13,660
Contingencies	Swale	1	25%	25%	25%	$1,279	$2,347	$3,415
Total	--	--	--	--	--	$6,395	$11,735	$17,075

Source: (SEWRPC, 1991)

Note: Mobilization/demobilization refers to the organization and planning involved in establishing a vegetative swale.

[a] Swale has a bottom width of 1.0 foot, a top width of 10 feet with 1:3 side slopes, and a 1,000-foot length.

[b] Area cleared = (top width + 10 feet) x swale length.

[c] Area grubbed = (top width x swale length).

[d] Volume excavated = (0.67 x top width x swale depth) x swale length (parabolic cross-section).

[e] Area tilled = $\left(\text{top width} + \frac{8(\text{swale depth}^2)}{3(\text{top width})}\right)$ x swale length (parabolic cross-section).

[f] Area seeded = area cleared x 0.5.

[g] Area sodded = area cleared x 0.5.

TABLE 3 ESTIMATED OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE COSTS

Component	Unit Cost	Swale Size (Depth and Top Width)		Comment
		1.5 Foot Depth, One-Foot Bottom Width, 10-Foot Top Width	3-Foot Depth, 3-Foot Bottom Width, 21-Foot Top Width	
Lawn Mowing	$0.85 / 1,000 ft^2/ mowing	$0.14 / linear foot	$0.21 / linear foot	Lawn maintenance area=(top width + 10 feet) x length. Mow eight times per year
General Lawn Care	$9.00 / 1,000 ft^2/ year	$0.18 / linear foot	$0.28 / linear foot	Lawn maintenance area = (top width + 10 feet) x length
Swale Debris and Litter Removal	$0.10 / linear foot / year	$0.10 / linear foot	$0.10 / linear foot	--
Grass Reseeding with Mulch and Fertilizer	$0.30 / yd^2	$0.01 / linear foot	$0.01 / linear foot	Area revegetated equals 1% of lawn maintenance area per year
Program Administration and Swale Inspection	$0.15 / linear foot / year, plus $25 / inspection	$0.15 / linear foot	$0.15 / linear foot	Inspect four times per year
Total	**--**	**$0.58 / linear foot**	**$ 0.75 / linear foot**	**--**

Source: SEWPRC, 1991.

The mention of trade names or commercial products does not constitute endorsement or recommendation for the use by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

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