

Stream Setbacks

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What is a Stream Setback?

A stream setback is a distance from a watercourse where some agricultural activities can't occur. This setback or buffer area protects water quality in surface water. The distance of a setback depends on the agricultural activity.

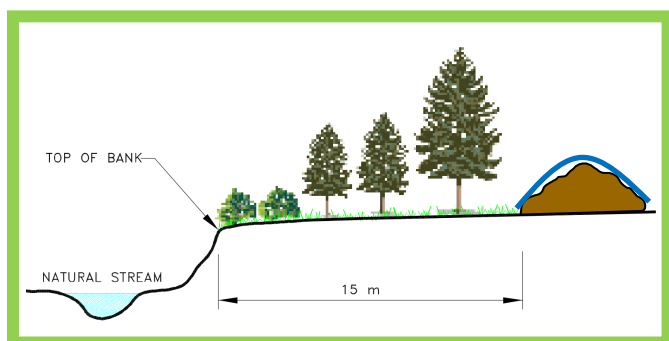
Setbacks still apply if the watercourse is on a neighbouring property.

There are also setbacks to protect your drinking water well, which are equal to or greater than streamside setbacks, for info visit : [Code of Practice for Agricultural Environmental Management \(gov.bc.ca\)](http://www.gov.bc.ca).

How do I measure a Stream Setback?

A setback is measured from the top of bank or typical high water mark (HWM) of nearby watercourses. That is the water level in the winter when water flow is generally at its highest.

HWM is not the level of water during an unusual rain event that may flood a property. However, observing a flood on your property is an excellent opportunity to identify areas of concern.



Adapted from BC Ministry of Agriculture factsheet: Agricultural building setbacks from watercourses in farming areas

What is a stream/watercourse?

A stream or watercourse on your property is an area of land that perennially or intermittently contains surface water.

A watercourse can be sinuous or straight like a drainage ditch.

Stream setbacks do not apply to: puddles; disconnected, dugout ponds for livestock watering; or furrows that are normally farmed.

	Activity	Setback (m)
Storing by-products and nutrient sources	permanent structure	15
	Field storage (<2 wks)	15
	Field storage ≥ 2 wks)	30
Composting and mortalities	permanent structure	15
	outdoor pile or burial pit	30
	incinerator	15
Storing or applying wood residue	permanent structure	15
	application >30cm deep	15
	application <30cm deep	3
Applying nutrients	does not include commercial fertilizer	3
Rearing and keeping livestock and poultry	<10 animals, fed	5
	≥10 animals, fed	30
	Any number, not fed	5
	Feed location	30

How does a setback protect water quality?

During rain events, water that doesn't soak into the soil flows overland as runoff. Runoff can carry excess nutrients, fertilizers, greases, oil and other contaminants directly to a stream. These contaminants impact the stream and wildlife, causing stress, disease and even death.

Setbacks offer a greater distance from the watercourse for runoff to infiltrate into the ground to ensure the health of aquatic habitats.

What are the benefits of setbacks?

Setbacks protect the stream but can also protect your property. Limiting structures and use of the setback area reduces erosion of land by the watercourse and protects your drinking water supply.

Limiting livestock access to a watercourse ensures they are not exposed to any contaminants, diseases or pathogens that might be in the water, should they drink it or wade into it with open sores.



Fenced stream setbacks prevent livestock access and can be planted. Here, a newly planted stream setback will provide cool shade for the stream and roots that prevent soil erosion.

Do I need to remove existing structures within a setback?

Existing buildings or other structures within a setback don't need to be removed (grandfathered) but work may be required to ensure the structure isn't causing erosion or contamination of the watercourse.

Planted Riparian Setbacks

Setbacks along watercourses are ideal spaces to plant for wildlife or hard working pollinators that benefit your farm. Planting a setback can be cheap, too! Many plants suited for growing along streams can grow from live stakes—branches cut from other plants. If they are growing on your farm already then they are free!

Some plants that can grow from stakes:

- Willow
- Hardhack
- Red osier dogwood
- Black twinberry

How do I maintain a setback?

Fences should be inspected regularly to ensure livestock don't have access to a setback area.

Setbacks can be managed to limit invasive species through mowing or manual removal. Herbicides should be used sparingly and many herbicides are prohibited near watercourses. If using herbicides all directions on the label should be carefully followed to avoid water contamination.

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