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Engineering and Design

GUIDELINES FOR LANDSCAPE PLANTING AND VEGETATION MANAGEMENT AT FLOODWALLS, LEVEES, EMBANKMENT DAMS, AND APPURTENANT STRUCTURES

CHAPTER 2
LANDSCAPE PLANTING: OBJECTIVES AND ENGINEERING REQUIREMENTS

2-1. Background. In flood damage reduction projects, the goal of landscape planting is to minimize and/or mitigate negative impacts to aesthetic, environmental, and ecological conditions, such that post-project conditions are equal to, or better than, pre-project conditions. Landscape planting objectives include the following: provide cover to prevent dust and erosion; provide ecological benefits, such as improved water quality and wildlife habitat; integrate the flood damage reduction system with the surrounding natural and human environment; separate activities; define zones of use; provide privacy; screen undesirable features or views; accentuate positive features or views; and create a pleasant environment for human use and recreation. These and any other project-specific landscape planting objectives must be consistent with both the policy set forth in Paragraph 1-3 and the engineering requirements detailed in this chapter.

2-2. Vegetation-Free Zone.

a. The vegetation-free zone is a three-dimensional corridor surrounding all levees, floodwalls, embankment dams, and critical appurtenant structures in all flood damage reduction systems. The vegetation-free zone applies to all vegetation except grass. Grass species are permitted, as described in Paragraph 4-8, for the purpose of erosion control.

b. The primary purpose of the vegetation-free zone is to provide a reliable corridor of access to, and along, levees, floodwalls, embankment dams, and appurtenant structures. This corridor must be free of obstructions to assure adequate access by personnel and equipment for surveillance, inspection, maintenance, monitoring, and flood-fighting. In the case of floodfighting, this access corridor must also provide the unobstructed space needed for the construction of temporary flood-control structures. Access is typically by four-wheel-drive vehicle, but for some purposes, such as maintenance and flood-fighting, access is required for larger equipment, such as tractors, bulldozers, dump trucks, and helicopters. Accessibility is essential to the reliability of flood damage reduction systems.

c. The vegetation-free zone must be wide enough, and tall enough, to accommodate all likely access requirements. The minimum allowable vegetation-free zone dimensions are based on lessons learned from flood-fighting experience and are illustrated in Chapter 6, for a variety of flood damage reduction system configurations. The general rule is as follows:

(1) The minimum height of the corridor shall be 8 feet, measured vertically from any point on the ground.

(2) The minimum width of the corridor shall be the width of the levee, floodwall, or embankment dam, including all critical appurtenant structures, plus 15 feet on each side, measured from the outer edge of the outermost critical structure. In the case of a planting berm (Figures 13, 14, and 15), the 15 feet is measured from the point at which the top surface of the planting berm meets the levee section.

(3) No vegetation, other than approved grasses, may penetrate the vegetation-free zone, with two exceptions, as illustrated in Figure 2:

(a) Tree trunks are measured to their centerline, so one half of the tree trunk may be within the vegetation-free zone.

(b) Newly planted trees, whose crowns can be expected to grow, or be pruned, clear of the vegetation-free zone within 10 years.

d. The minimum vegetation-free zone dimensions may not be diminished without a formal variance (see Paragraph 1-3*b*). Due to specific site conditions and project requirements, many levees, floodwalls, embankment dams, and appurtenant structures will be determined, by the project design team, to require a vegetation-free zone larger than the minimum described here.

e. Paragraph 2-2 has established the minimum acceptable width of the vegetation-free zone at 15 feet. Other than by variance, as described above, the single exception to this 15-foot minimum requirement arises in the case of an existing project where the width of the existing real estate interest for the project is less than 15 feet. In such a case, the vegetation-free zone width shall be the maximum attainable within the existing real estate interest.

2-3. Vegetation-Management Zone. A recommended alternative to enlarging the vegetation free zone is the addition of an adjacent *vegetation-management zone* (see Figure 22). A vegetation-management zone provides greater opportunity to include vegetation by reserving the option to manage it selectively, as needed. Two of many possible scenarios are presented below.

a. Several trees, just outside the vegetation-free zone, are inhibiting grass growth, through light deprivation and/or the production of their own natural herbicides that limit competition for moisture and nutrients. These trees should be either removed or modified, as appropriate, to assure that grasses thrive and continue to provide effective erosion control.

b. A large tree, outside the vegetation-free zone, becomes a *hazard tree* when its root system is severely damaged by construction activity, thereby increasing its susceptibility to wind throw and the associated risk of damage to a floodwall. This tree should be removed.

2-4. Root Impacts. As stated in Paragraph 2-2, the primary purpose of the vegetation-free zone is access. However, it also serves a secondary purpose: it provides distance between root systems and levees, floodwalls, embankment dams, and appurtenant structures, thereby moderating reliability risks associated with the following two situations: potential piping and seepage due to root penetration; and structural damage (a hole in the ground, surrounded by an area of disturbed earth) resulting from a wind-driven tree overturning. Though not adequate for all situations, this 15-foot zone does provide a measure of risk reduction, as follows:

a. Root size and numbers diminish with distance from the tree trunk.

b. The hole and its surrounding area of disturbed earth, created by a tree overturning, typically has a radius ranging from 6 to 12 feet. This secondary effect of the vegetation-free

zone is important to the reliability of flood damage reduction systems; it is not a root-free zone but it is a zone of reduced root impact.

2-5. Root-Free Zone. Planting design must consider the possible implications to foundation strength and performance. The integrity of the foundation could be compromised if potential seepage paths were created by root penetration and/or root decay. The root-free zone provides a margin of safety between the greatest expected extent of plant roots and the beginning face of any structure that is critical to the performance and reliability of the flood damage reduction system. The list of such structures includes levees, floodwalls, embankment dams, seepage berms, seepage drains, toe drains, pressure relief wells, and cut-off trenches. These critical structures must be root-free, as illustrated in Figures 13, 14, 15, 17, and 19. The rooting habit of each plant selected for use near a root-free zone must be predictably understood with respect to its potential to invade the root-free zone and compromise the reliability of the flood damage reduction system. Landscape planting plans will reflect full recognition of the importance of selecting appropriate plant species and varieties. Root barriers may be used to provide an added measure of assurance, but they should not be a substitute for adequate distance between plantings and root-free zones. Root barriers shall not retard groundwater or seepage flow. Some root barriers include herbicides to enhance effectiveness; in every case, these shall be evaluated prior to use to assure against negative environmental impacts.

2-6. Water-Current and Wave-Action Barrier. The use of suitable vegetation, such as shrub forms of *Salix* (willow), riverward of the vegetation-free zone is encouraged as an environmentally beneficial means to moderate the erosive potential of water currents and wave action.