

Description

Grass buffers are densely vegetated strips of grass designed to accept sheet flow from upgradient development. Properly designed grass buffers play a key role in LID, enabling infiltration and slowing runoff. Grass buffers provide filtration (straining) of sediment. Buffers differ from swales in that they are designed to accommodate overland sheet flow rather than concentrated or channelized flow.



Photograph GB-1. A flush curb allows roadway runoff to sheet flow through the grass buffer. Flows are then further treated by the grass swale. Photo courtesy of Muller Engineering.

Site Selection

Grass buffers can be incorporated into a wide range of development settings. Runoff can be directly accepted from a parking lot, roadway, or the roof of a structure, provided the flow is distributed in a uniform manner over the width of the buffer. This can be achieved through the use of flush curbs, slotted curbs, or level spreaders where needed. Grass buffers are often used in conjunction with grass swales. They are well suited for use in riparian zones to assist in stabilizing channel banks adjacent to major drainageways and receiving waters. These areas can also sometimes serve multiple functions such as recreation.

Hydrologic Soil Groups (HSG) A and B provide the best infiltration capacity for grass buffers. For Type C and D soils, buffers still serve to provide filtration (straining) although infiltration rates are lower. Refer to Fact Sheet T-0 to quantify volume reduction in grass buffers and understand how HSG effects reduction.

Designing for Maintenance

Recommended ongoing maintenance practices for all BMPs are provided in Chapter 6 of this manual. During design the following should be considered to ensure ease of maintenance over the long-term:

- Where appropriate (where vehicle safety would not be impacted), install the top of the buffer 1 to 3 inches below the adjacent pavement so that growth of vegetation and accumulation of sediment at the edge of the strip does not prevent runoff from entering the buffer. Alternatively, a sloped edge can be used adjacent to vehicular traffic areas.
- Amend soils to encourage deep roots and reduce irrigation requirements, as well as promote infiltration.

Grass Buffer	
Functions	
LID/Volume Red.	Yes
WQCV Capture	No
WQCV+Flood Control	No
Fact Sheet Includes EURV Guidance	No
Typical Effectiveness for Targeted Pollutants³	
Sediment/Solids	Good
Nutrients	Moderate
Total Metals	Good
Bacteria	Poor
Other Considerations	
Life-cycle Costs	Low
³ Based primarily on data from the International Stormwater BMP Database (www.bmpdatabase.org).	

- Design and adjust the irrigation system (temporary or permanent) to provide water in amounts appropriate for the selected vegetation. Irrigation needs will change from month to month and year to year.
- Protect the grass buffer from vehicular traffic when using this BMP adjacent to roadways. This can be done with a slotted curb (or other type of barrier) or by constructing a reinforced grass shoulder (see Fact Sheet T-10.5).

Design Procedure and Criteria

The following steps outline the grass buffer design procedure and criteria. [Figure GB-1](#) is a schematic of the facility and its components:

1. **Design Discharge:** Use the hydrologic procedures described in the *Runoff* chapter of Volume 1 to determine the 2-year peak flow rate (Q_2) of the area draining to the grass buffer.
2. **Minimum Width:** The width (W), normal to flow of the buffer, is typically the same as the contributing basin (see [Figure GB-1](#)). An exception to this is where flows become concentrated. Concentrated flows require a level spreader to distribute flows evenly across the width of the buffer. The minimum width should be:

$$W = \frac{Q_2}{0.05} \quad \text{Equation GB-1}$$

Where:

W = width of buffer (ft)

Q_2 = 2-year peak runoff (cfs)

3. **Length:** The recommended length (L), the distance along the sheet flow direction, should be a minimum of 14 feet. This value is based on the findings of Barrett et al. 2004 in *Stormwater Pollutant Removal in Roadside Vegetated Strips* and is appropriate for buffers with greater than 80% vegetative cover and slopes up to 10%. The study found that pollutant removal continues throughout a length of 14 feet. Beyond this length, a point of diminishing returns in pollutant reduction was found. It is important to note that shorter lengths or slightly steeper slopes will also provide some level of removal where site constraints dictate the geometry of the buffer.

Benefits

- Filters (strains) sediment and trash.
- Reduces directly connected impervious area. (See Chapter 3 for quantifying benefits.)
- Can easily be incorporated into a treatment train approach.
- Provides green space available for multiple uses including recreation and snow storage.
- Straightforward maintenance requirements when the buffer is protected from vehicular traffic.

Limitations

- Frequently damaged by vehicles when adjacent to roadways and unprotected.
- A thick vegetative cover is needed for grass buffers to be effective.
- Nutrient removal in grass buffers is typically low.
- High loadings of coarse solids, trash, and debris require pretreatment.
- Space for grass buffers may not be available in ultra urban areas (lot-line-to-lot-line).

4. **Buffer Slope:** The design slope of a grass buffer in the direction of flow should not exceed 10%. Generally, a minimum slope of 2% or more in turf is adequate to facilitate positive drainage. For slopes less than 2%, consider including an underdrain system to mitigate nuisance drainage.

5. **Flow Characteristics (sheet or concentrated):** Concentrated flows can occur when the width of the watershed differs from that of the grass buffer. Additionally, when the product of the watershed flow length and the interface slope (the slope of the watershed normal to flow at the grass buffer) exceeds approximately one, flows may become concentrated. Use the following equations to determine flow characteristics:

$$\text{Sheet Flow: } FL(SI) \leq 2$$

Equation GB-2

$$\text{Concentrated Flow: } FL(SI) > 2$$

Equation GB-3

Where:

FL = watershed flow length (ft)

SI = interface slope (normal to flow) (ft/ft)

6. **Flow Distribution:** Flows delivered to a grass buffer must be sheet flows. Slotted or flush curbing, permeable pavements, or other devices can be used to spread flows. The grass buffer should have relatively consistent slopes to avoid concentrating flows within the buffer.

A level spreader should be used when flows are concentrated. A level spreader can be a slotted drain designed to discharge flow through the slot as shown in Photo GB-2. It could be an exfiltration trench filled with gravel, which allows water to infiltrate prior to discharging over a level concrete or rock curb. There are many ways to design and construct a level spreader. They can also be used in series when the length of the buffer allows flows to re-concentrate. See Figure GB-2 for various level spreader sections.



Photograph GB-2. This level spreader carries concentrated flows into a slotted pipe encased in concrete to distribute flows evenly to the grass buffer shown left in the photo. Photo courtesy of Bill Wenk.

Use of Grass Buffers

Sheet flow of stormwater through a grassed area provides some benefit in pollutant removal and volume reduction even when the geometry of the BMP does not meet the criteria provided in this Fact Sheet. These criteria provide a design procedure that should be used when possible; however, when site constraints are limiting, this treatment concept is still encouraged.

Photos GB-3 and GB-4 show a level spreader that includes a basin for sedimentation. Concentrated flows enter the basin via stormsewer. The basin is designed to drain slowly while overflow is spread evenly to the downstream vegetation. A small notch, orifice, or pipe can be used to drain the level spreader completely. The opening should be small to encourage frequent flows to overtop the level spreader but not so small that it is frequently clogged.

7. **Soil Preparation:** In order to encourage establishment and long-term health of the selected vegetation, it is essential that soil conditions be properly prepared prior to installation. Following site grading, poor soil conditions often exist. When possible, remove, strip, stockpile, and reuse on-site topsoil. If the site does not contain topsoil, the soils should be amended prior to vegetation. Typically 3 to 5 cubic yards of soil amendment (compost) per 1,000 square feet, tilled 6 inches into the soil is required in order for vegetation to thrive, as well as to enable infiltration of runoff. Additionally, inexpensive soil tests can be conducted to determine required soil amendments. (Some local governments may also require proof of soil amendment in landscaped areas for water conservation reasons.)

8. **Vegetation:** This is the most critical component for treatment within a grass buffer. Select durable, dense, and drought tolerant grasses to vegetate the buffer. Also consider the size of the watershed as larger watersheds will experience more frequent flows. The goal is to provide a dense mat of vegetative cover. Grass buffer performance falls off rapidly as the vegetation coverage declines below 80% (Barrett et al.2004).



Photograph GB-3. This level spreader includes the added benefit of a sedimentation basin prior to even distribution of concentrated flows from the roadway into the grass buffer. Photo courtesy of Bill Wenk.



Photograph GB-4. Maintenance access is provided via the ramp located at the end of the basin. Photo courtesy of Bill Wenk.

Turf grasses such as Kentucky bluegrass are often selected due to these qualities¹. Dense native turf grasses may also be selected where a more natural look is desirable. Once established, these provide the benefit of lower irrigation requirements. See the *Revegetation* chapter in Volume 2 of this manual with regard to seed mix selection, planting and ground preparation. Depending on soils and anticipated flows, consider erosion control measures until vegetation has been established.

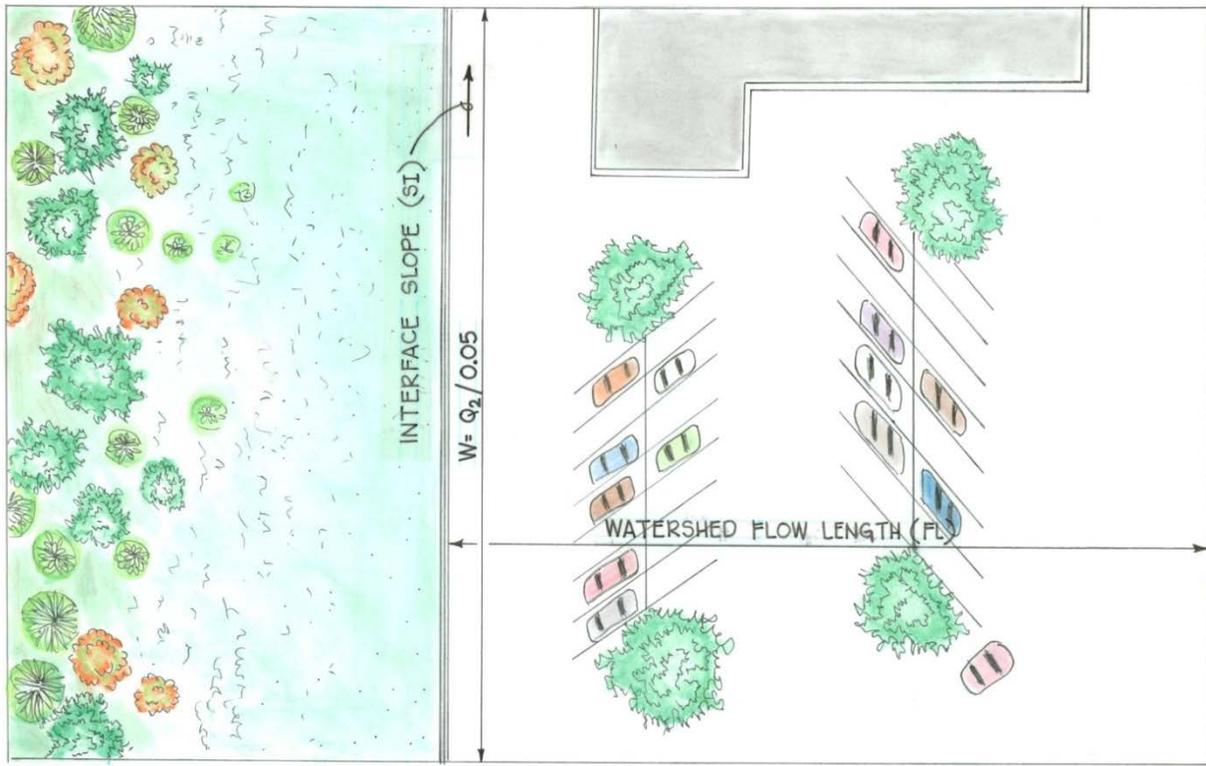
9. **Irrigation:** Grass buffers should be equipped with irrigation systems to promote establishment and survival in Colorado's semi-arid environment. Systems may be temporary or permanent, depending on the type of vegetation selected. Irrigation application rates and schedules should be developed and adjusted throughout the establishment and growing season to meet the needs of the selected plant species. Initially, native grasses require the same irrigation requirements as bluegrass. After the grass is established, irrigation requirements for native grasses can be reduced. Irrigation practices have a significant effect on the function of the grass buffer. Overwatering decreases the permeability of the soil, reducing the infiltration capacity and contributing to nuisance baseflows. Conversely, under watering may result in delays in establishment of the vegetation in the short term and unhealthy vegetation that provides less filtering and increased susceptibility to erosion and rilling over the long term.
10. **Outflow Collection:** Provide a means for downstream conveyance. A grass swale can be used for this purpose, providing additional LID benefits.

Construction Considerations

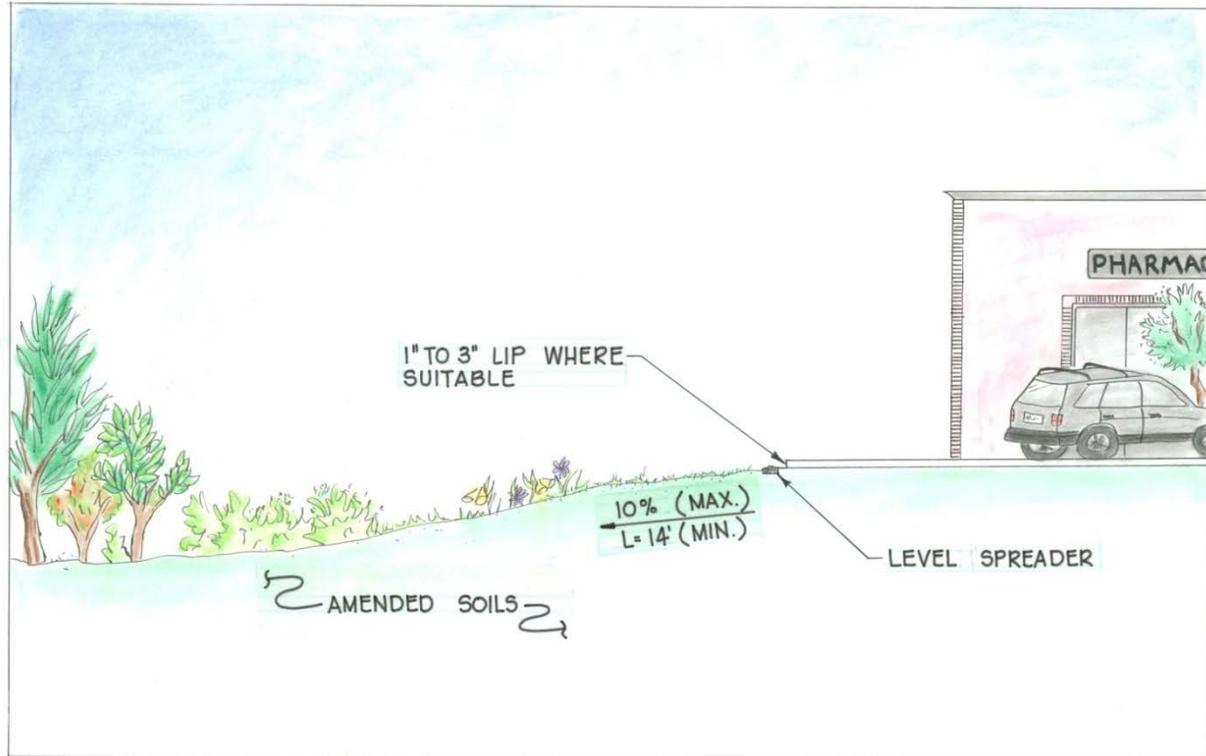
Success of grass buffers depends not only on a good design and long-term maintenance, but also on installing the facility in a manner that enables the BMP to function as designed. Construction considerations include:

- The final grade of the buffer is critical. Oftentimes, following soil amendment and placement of sod, the final grade is too high to accept sheet flow. The buffer should be inspected prior to placement of seed or sod to ensure appropriate grading.
- Perform soil amending, fine grading, and seeding only after tributary areas have been stabilized and utility work crossing the buffer has been completed.
- When using sod tiles stagger the ends of the tiles to prevent the formation of channels along the joints. Use a roller on the sod to ensure there are no air pockets between the sod and soil.
- Avoid over compaction of soils in the buffer area during construction to preserve infiltration capacities.
- Erosion and sediment control measures on upgradient disturbed areas must be maintained to prevent excessive sediment loading to grass buffer.

¹ Although Kentucky bluegrass has relatively high irrigation requirements to maintain a lush, green aesthetic, it also withstands drought conditions by going dormant. Over-irrigation of Kentucky bluegrass is a common problem along the Colorado Front Range, and it can be healthy, although less lush, with much less irrigation than is typically applied.



PLAN



PROFILE

Figure GB-1. Typical Grass Buffer Graphic by Adia Davis.

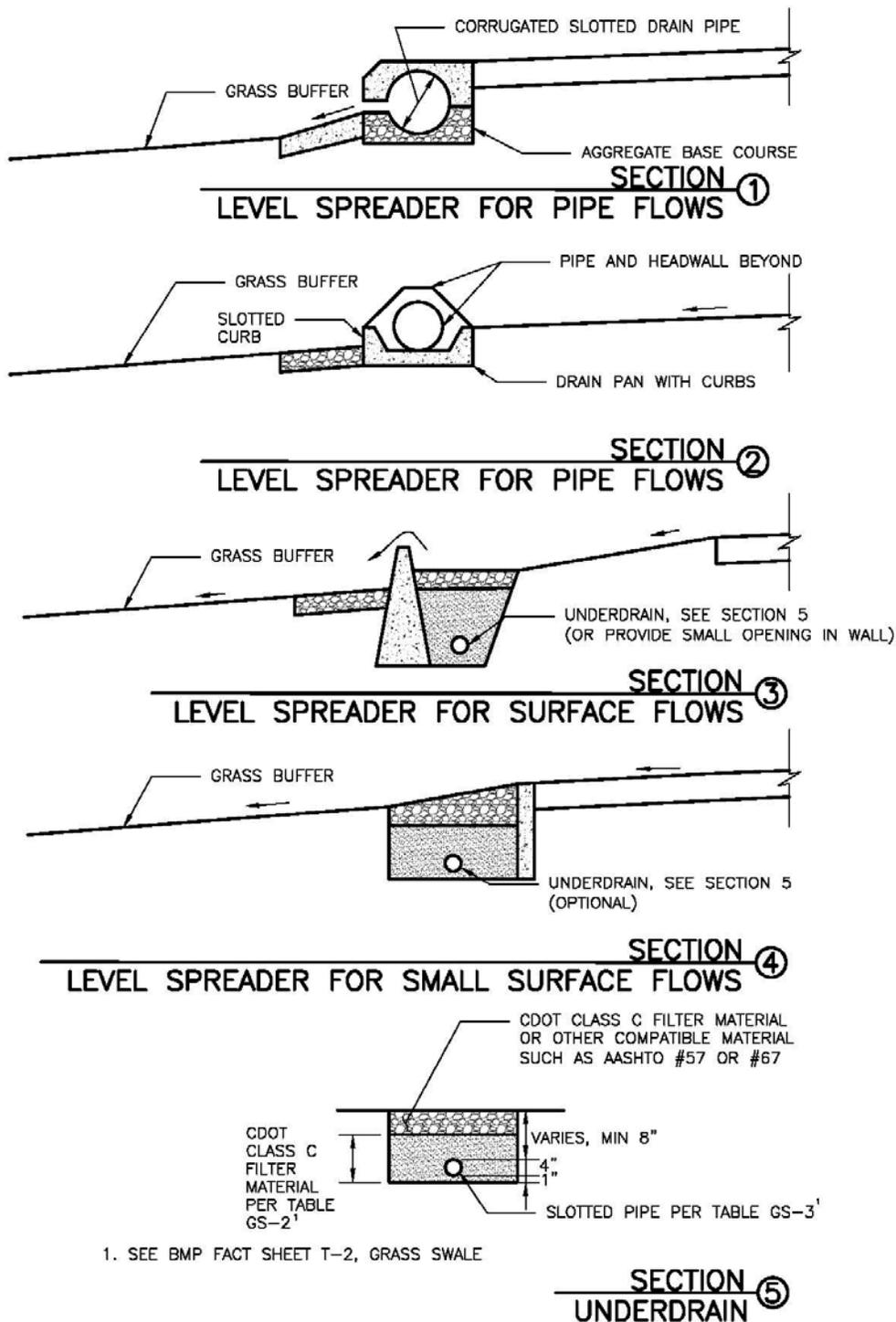


Figure GB-2. Typical Level Spreader Details

Design Example

The *UD-BMP* workbook, designed as a tool for both designer and reviewing agency is available at www.udfcd.org. This section provides a completed design form from this workbook as an example.

Design Procedure Form: Grass Buffer (GB)

Sheet 1 of 1

Designer: R. Dunn
Company: BMP, Inc.
Date: November 24, 2010
Project: Filing 37
Location: NE Corner of 34th Ave. and 105th St., north entrance road

1. Design Discharge A) 2-Year Peak Flow Rate of the Area Draining to the Grass Buffer	$Q_2 =$ <u>5.0</u> cfs
2. Minimum Width of Grass Buffer	$W_G =$ <u>100</u> ft
3. Length of Grass Buffer (14' or greater recommended)	$L_G =$ <u>15</u> ft
4. Buffer Slope (in the direction of flow, not to exceed 0.1 ft / ft)	$S_G =$ <u>0.100</u> ft / ft
5. Flow Characteristics (sheet or concentrated) A) Does runoff flow into the grass buffer across the entire width of the buffer? B) Watershed Flow Length C) Interface Slope (normal to flow) D) Type of Flow Sheet Flow: $F_L * S_i \leq 1$ Concentrated Flow: $F_L * S_i > 1$	Choose One <input checked="" type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No $F_L =$ <u>20</u> ft $S_i =$ <u>0.020</u> ft / ft <div style="background-color: #e0ffe0; text-align: center; padding: 2px;">SHEET FLOW</div>
6. Flow Distribution for Concentrated Flows	Choose One <input checked="" type="radio"/> None (sheet flow) <input type="radio"/> Slotted Curbing <input type="radio"/> Level Spreader <input type="radio"/> Other (Explain):
7 Soil Preparation (Describe soil amendment)	<u>Till 5 CY of compost per 1000 SF to a depth of 6 inches.</u>
8 Vegetation (Check the type used or describe "Other")	Choose One <input type="radio"/> Existing Xeric Turf Grass <input checked="" type="radio"/> Irrigated Turf Grass <input type="radio"/> Other (Explain):
9. Irrigation (*Select None if existing buffer area has 80% vegetation AND will not be disturbed during construction.)	Choose One <input checked="" type="radio"/> Temporary <input type="radio"/> Permanent <input type="radio"/> None*
10. Outflow Collection (Check the type used or describe "Other")	Choose One <input checked="" type="radio"/> Grass Swale <input type="radio"/> Street Gutter <input type="radio"/> Storm Sewer Inlet <input type="radio"/> Other (Explain):
Notes: _____	

References

Barrett, M., Lantin, A. and S. Austrheim-Smith. 2004. *Stormwater Pollutant Removal in Roadside Vegetated Buffer Strips*. Prepared for the Transportation Research Board: Washington, DC.

California Stormwater Quality Association (CASQA). 2003. *California Stormwater BMP Handbook, Vegetated Buffer Strip*.