



# BIG QUESTIONS, ANSWERED

## What do I need to know about buffer zones on my organic farm?

### WHAT IS A BUFFER ZONE?

In USDA organic regulations, a buffer zone is “an area located between a certified production operation or portion of a production operation and an adjacent land area that is not maintained under organic management.”

### DO I NEED A BUFFER ZONE?

If there is any risk of contamination from adjacent properties or activities that pose a threat to crops you intend to be “sold, labeled or represented” as organic, you need a buffer.

### IS THERE A MINIMUM SIZE REQUIREMENT?

No. The buffer zone only must be adequate to prevent the unintended application of a prohibited substance – from adjacent non-organically managed or unmanaged lands – to organic crops.

### WHAT DO BUFFER ZONES PROTECT CROPS FROM?

**Prohibited substances:**  
Substances not allowed in the organic standards like pesticide spray drift or run-off

**Excluded methods:**  
Such as contamination of organic crops by pollen from GMO varieties grown nearby

### CAN ORGANIC CROPS BE HARVESTED FROM A BUFFER ZONE?

No. Crops can be grown in a buffer zone but they may not be sold or represented as organic. Certifying agents may perform pesticide or GMO residue testing of organic crops to verify that buffer zones are adequate.

## UNDERSTANDING *the* BASICS

When planning and building buffer zones, they “must be sufficient in size or other features (e.g., windbreaks or a diversion ditch) to prevent contact by prohibited substances applied to adjacent land areas.”

You must use “distinct, defined boundaries and buffer zones such as runoff diversions to prevent the unintended application of a prohibited substance to the crop or contact with a prohibited substance applied to adjoining land that is not under organic management.”

Just ask yourself: Do I have a situation – e.g., an adjacent conventional farm, drainage from roadways, etc. – that could allow prohibited substances to reach my crops?

The only requirement is that a buffer does its job. Size matters, but so does the planting and management plan (e.g., plant type, height of a hedgerow, plant density and bioswales).

Factors such as common wind patterns, land slope, chemical application activity and stormwater drainage patterns all will inform how you set up your buffer.

Buffer areas provide a dedicated zone to monitor effective means to prevent crop contamination. For example, buffer areas can provide visual cues from plant life impacted by a neighbor’s aerial spraying (e.g., 10 feet closest to neighboring field has leaf spotting, next 10 feet has random discoloration and next 25 feet are untouched).

Buffer zones should be clearly indicated on the required Farm Map.

### Resources:

Ask questions via the Oregon Tilth Farmer Hotline: (503) 581-8102

USDA Buffer Zone FAQ <http://1.usa.gov/22mAfck>



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## How can I use my buffer zones to conserve natural resources and promote biodiversity?

### PROTECT WATER QUALITY

When buffer zones are near water, “filter strips” of perennial grasses and forbs can be planted to prevent materials from entering waterways. Buffers slow run-off, allowing more water to remain and be absorbed in fields or field edges.

### PROVIDE HABITAT FOR POLLINATORS + BENEFICIAL INSECTS

A diverse mixture of plants in a buffer provides food and habitat for pollinators, spiders and other beneficial insects year-round. Native plants often provide the greatest benefit.

### RESTORE NATIVE PLANT COMMUNITIES

Buffers can be used to establish native grasses, forbs, shrubs, and trees to restore or mitigate the loss of native plants. Prepping the site goes a long way. Competition from weeds can envelop a poorly prepped site, killing off specially selected buffer plants.

### REDUCE EROSION FROM WIND

Planting rows of trees and shrubs helps a buffer act as a windbreak or shelterbelt, reducing the potential for soil erosion in fields from wind. The windbreak plants can also provide the added benefit of wildlife habitat.

### PROVIDE WILDLIFE HABITAT

A buffer area featuring a mix of trees, shrubs, grasses and forbs can provide food, shelter and enable movement of birds and terrestrial wildlife. If planting along water, create shade with plantings to lower water temperatures to improve aquatic habitat.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

National Agroforestry Center's Design Guidelines for Buffers, Corridors, & Greenways

<http://nac.unl.edu/buffers/index.html>

Oregon Tilth Resource Library's Guides for Buffer Areas

[www.tilth.org/resources](http://www.tilth.org/resources)

Xerces Society's Pollinator Conservation Resource Center

[www.xerces.org/pollinator-resource-center/](http://www.xerces.org/pollinator-resource-center/)

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

[www.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov)

