Title of the Practice: Field Border - Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) Conservation Practice 386

Definition: A strip of permanent vegetation established at the edge or around the perimeter of a field.

Purposes: On organic farms field borders protect soil and water quality by intercepting soil particles and nutrients contained in runoff before they enter surface waters, protecting the integrity of organic crops by intercepting airborne pollutants and materials prohibited by the National Organic Program (NOP), providing wildlife food and cover (enhancing biodiversity on the farm and providing beneficial and pollinator habitat), helping manage plant pests and contributing to increased yields.

Growers applying for cost share assistance to implement this practice will typically have crop fields adjacent to conventional production fields, roadways, watercourses or public utilities such as power corridors or pipelines, where there is a threat of contamination from use of prohibited materials as defined by the National Organic Program rules and regulations. Potential contaminants may include drift from pesticide sprays, dust with associated contaminants, manure from land application of livestock waste products, pollen from GMO crops, etc. In most cases, crops harvested from buffer areas cannot be sold as “organic.”

The National Organic Program requires growers to include buffers in their Organic System Plans. No specific rules stipulate how wide the buffer area needs to be. Growers should consult their certifying agencies with respect to any buffer requirement “standards” that those agencies require. Typically, the width of the border varies depending on the contamination “threat,” and might vary between 20 to 50 feet. Variance will depend upon direction of prevailing winds, crop species grown in adjacent fields and sensibilities of neighboring farmers with respect to pesticide usage and organic agriculture. Buffer width might also vary depending on the amount of land that would be taken out of production relative to the land available for production on the organic farm.

As the minimum field border width allowed by Conservation Practice 386 is 10 feet and as most organic buffers required are greater than that distance, this practice is well-suited for adoption in organic operation. Organic growers should be sensitive in the species selection process and reject species that could possibly serve as hosts for insects and/or diseases of crops grown in adjacent fields. Preferred species will have the physical characteristics necessary to intercept drift of any potential contaminants from adjacent conventional production fields.

Organic growers will need to be made aware that vegetation selection and management shall be in accordance with NRCS Practice Standards 512 (Forage and Biomass Planting/NC Planting Guide) or 645 (Upland Wildlife Habitat Management/Appendix 1), as they most likely will not be aware of these publications. Growers may want to include species for consideration that are not on these lists.

In the same vein, for wildlife food and cover and pollinator habitat, borders must be at least 20 feet wide. Trees and shrubs may comprise up to 10% of the cover. Growers should select vegetation as per Practice 645/Appendix, and apply NRCS ‘Early Successional Habitat Management (647) practices to 30-50% of the total field border’s length annually. The border must be located at least 20 feet from the hard surface edge of a public road and the habitat portion shall not be used as a travel way or turnrow. For smaller organic operations, these requirements may preclude use of these scenarios because this results in a setback of at least 40 feet, possibly longer given a need for a turnrow. Many smaller growers might find that too much land is taken out of production. However, the inclusion of “foregone costs” in the payment calculation may offset these concerns.

Written plans and specifications required by the practice standard duplicate NOP requirements for maps/plans that include field border widths/lengths/locations, species selected and planting density, site prep/planting/planting methods and fertility. NRCS field staff should recognize that maintenance of desirable plant communities through cultural practices such as burning and mowing are likely to be low on the list of grower priorities during the growing season due to time constraints and availability/cost of labor.

Organic growers must use organically grown seeds, annual seedlings, and planting stock. Non-organically produced, untreated seeds and planting stock may be used to produce an organic crop when an equivalent organically produced variety is not commercially available. Non-organically produced seeds and planting stock that have been treated with a substance included on the National List of synthetic substances allowed for use in organic crop production may be used to produce an organic crop when an equivalent organically produced or untreated variety is not commercially available. Non-organically produced annual seedlings may be used to produce an organic crop when a temporary variance has been granted, or in the event of a natural disaster.