Safeguarding watercourses through vegetative buffers

Good agriculture and environmental condition 4 (GAEC)- Buffer strips along watercourses

What's it about?

Protecting ecosystems and water quality

Buffer strips act as **natural filters**, trapping sediments, nutrients, and chemicals before they reach the water, which helps **protect aquatic ecosystems** and maintain water quality. They also provide important **habitats for wildlife** and contribute to **biodiversity** along the waterways.

Under **GAEC 4**, farmers are required to establish **buffer strips** along all **watercourses** (rivers, streams, lakes, ditches, etc.) adjacent to agricultural land.

These buffer strips must:

- Be **uncultivated** and **vegetated** (no fertilisers or plant protection products allowed)
- Help prevent **pollution** and erosion
- Be at least **3 metres wide**, with some countries requiring **wider strips** (up to 6 metres or more), depending on environmental sensitivity, slope, or water body classification

This requirement applies to **all CAP beneficiaries** with land bordering watercourses.

This project receives funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 862480.

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What do you need to do?

Practical guidelines for its management

To comply with this standard, you must:

- **Establish a buffer strip** along all watercourses that border your agricultural land
- Ensure the buffer is **vegetated** to trap sediment, nutrients, and chemicals **before they reach the water**
- Keep the buffer strip uncultivated **no fertilisers or plant protection products** should be used
- Ensure the buffer's **minimum width** is **3 metres**, or follow any specific **national regulations** regarding width

In some cases, buffer strips may count towards **GAEC 8** obligations for non-productive features. Always check national rules for clarification.

Why is this good practice?

Improving biodiversity and water quality

By maintaining buffer strips, you help:

- **Trap sediments, nutrients,** and **chemicals,** preventing pollution from reaching watercourses
- **Reduce eutrophication** (algae blooms and oxygen depletion) in water bodies
- **Prevent soil erosion** into rivers and lakes, helping to maintain healthy waterways
- Provide **important habitats** for **pollinators** and other wildlife, promoting biodiversity across your farm

Buffer strips are a **simple yet effective way to protect the environment** and improve both water quality and biodiversity.

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Practical tips

Regional variations and management tips

- **Check national guidance** for specific rules on buffer strip width and management, as some regions may have stricter regulations based on slope, soil type, or water body classification
- **Mown or grazed grass** is often an acceptable vegetative cover, as long as **erosion and runoff risks** are controlled
- Some **Member States** allow buffer strips to contribute to **GAEC 8** obligations verify local regulations for more information

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