

Thurston County Stormwater Solutions

LID Fact Sheet: Clearing & Grading

Issue

Limiting clearing, grading, and soil disturbance outside of the building footprint on newly developed residential and commercial sites — especially sites with sensitive features — minimizes disturbance of native vegetation and soils. This low-impact development (LID) approach to site development helps stormwater infiltrate during and after construction.

Why are changes needed?

Thurston County currently requires a construction permit for grading that involves over 50 cubic yards of excavation or fill. The Thurston County Drainage Design and Erosion Control Manual (DDECM) requires review for projects that involve clearing of more than 7,000 square feet; this includes clearing associated with grading, conversion from forest to lawn, and conversion from forest to pasture. However, a permit is not required for projects that may involve clearing that is not associated with grading and is outside of a critical area. This was identified as a gap during the code review for LID.

Currently, mass clearing is regulated if it is forestry-related. In the Lacey, Olympia, and Tumwater UGAs, clearing trees from an area greater than 5,000 square feet for development triggers a Forest Practices permit. Outside of these areas, the permit is required for harvest over 5,000 board feet – roughly equivalent to one truck-load of timber. Development that converts forest land to a subdivision in the Lacey, Olympia, and Tumwater UGAs are required to preserve 5% of the site in a tree tract that includes existing or replanted trees. There are no similar requirements for preserving or replanting trees or limiting clearing outside these UGA standards, aside from regulations tied to critical areas. In addition, Forest Practices provisions, such as these, focus on regulations for commercial timber and generally do not include protections for native vegetation, such as shrubs, that can still provide stormwater and habitat benefits.

Trees and other vegetation help manage stormwater runoff by intercepting rain before it hits the ground, as well as by taking water up through their roots. Removing that vegetation increases the amount of water that needs to be managed on site. A low impact approach to site development does not begin with the wholesale clearing of a site, instead limiting clearing to the areas necessary for placing buildings and infrastructure and maneuvering equipment. This allows the native soils and vegetation on a site to manage stormwater and remove pollutants naturally.

What changes are proposed to current regulations?

The draft Thurston County Code changes would cover gaps associated with site-clearing activities and help protect soils and vegetation that help filter stormwater. Proposed changes include:

- Expand the current grading permit to apply to all “land-disturbing activities” to include clearing over 7,000 square feet, and clearing within critical areas and shoreline jurisdiction.
- Limit clearing outside of an envelope around approved building footprints, impervious surfaces, replacement landscaping areas, and other site development features until building permit is approved.
- Where site clearing is proposed independent of a building or other permit, limit clearing to 35% of the site to allow for full dispersion of stormwater when the site is constructed.
- Clearing limitations would include understory vegetation, as well as trees.

What kinds of activities would be captured by the expanded grading permit?

This permit would capture clearing events that are not associated with grading, and are not large enough to require a Forest Practices permit in the rural areas, and would align the code with the requirements of the County’s drainage manual (DDECM), referenced above. The permit would also cover clearing in critical areas and along shorelines, designated under the county’s Shoreline Master Program.

How much would the permit cost?

The cost of the permit will depend on the size of the project. Under the 2016 fee schedule, a land disturbing activity construction permit for clearing only would cost \$0 for projects up to ¼ acre (32,670 square feet), \$264 for projects from ¼ to 2.5 acres (108,900 square feet), or \$528 for projects greater than 2.5 acres (108,901 square feet). Permit fees are subject to annual adjustments.

Would I need a permit to mow my lawn, work in my garden, or maintain landscaping?

No. These activities would be considered exempt.

Would I need a permit to remove a tree that is endangering my home?

No. Emergency removal of trees in imminent danger of harming people or structures would not need a permit. Removal of hazard trees, those with a high probability of falling and where there is a structure within a tree length, does not require a permit, but may require other review if it is within a critical area.

Would I need a permit to remove invasive or undesirable plants, such as Scotch broom?

No. This activity would be considered exempt.

Contact Information: Thurston County Resource Stewardship Department, 2000 Lakeridge Drive SW, Olympia, WA 98502. Staff contact: Allison Osterberg, (360)754-3355 x7011, osterba@co.thurston.wa.us

Web: www.co.thurston.wa.us/waterresources/lid

