

Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions (GAECs)

Information to safeguard soils, habitats and landscape features on agricultural land

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Buffer strips along watercourses

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Protection for landscape features

1 Buffer strips along watercourses (GAEC 1)

Date published: 6 March, 2018

For recent changes to this guidance, please see the bottom of the page.

Buffer strips along watercourses

The aim of these rules is to protect water against pollution. The requirements restrict the storage, application of fertilisers and pesticides and cultivations along watercourses.

You must not:

1. apply organic manure* to any land which is situated within:

- 10 metres of any surface water*
- 50 metres of any well, borehole, etc. for the supply of water

2. locate field heaps* within:

- 10 metres of any surface water
- 50 metres of any well, borehole, etc. for the supply of water

3. allow organic manure from a store on your holding to become located within:

- 10 metres of any surface water
- 50 metres of any well, borehole, etc. for the supply of water

4. apply chemical* fertiliser to any land in a way that makes it likely the fertiliser will directly enter any surface water

5. apply nitrogen fertiliser* to land if there is significant risk of nitrogen entering surface water, taking into account:

- the slope of the land, particularly if greater than 12 degrees
- any ground cover
- proximity to any surface water
- weather conditions
- the type of fertiliser being applied

Applying nitrogen/chemical fertiliser to land that is waterlogged, flooded, has been frozen for over 12 hours in the preceding 24 hours or covered in snow is considered to pose a significant risk of the fertiliser entering surface water.

6. cultivate land within two metres of the top of the bank* of surface water unless one of the following exemptions apply:

- cultivating to establish a green cover where one doesn't already exist. A green cover excludes crops that are grown for a commercial purpose, for example arable crops including crops that are under sown with grass
- cultivating to establish a new hedge

7. apply pesticides within two metres of the top of the bank* of surface water unless the following exemption applies:

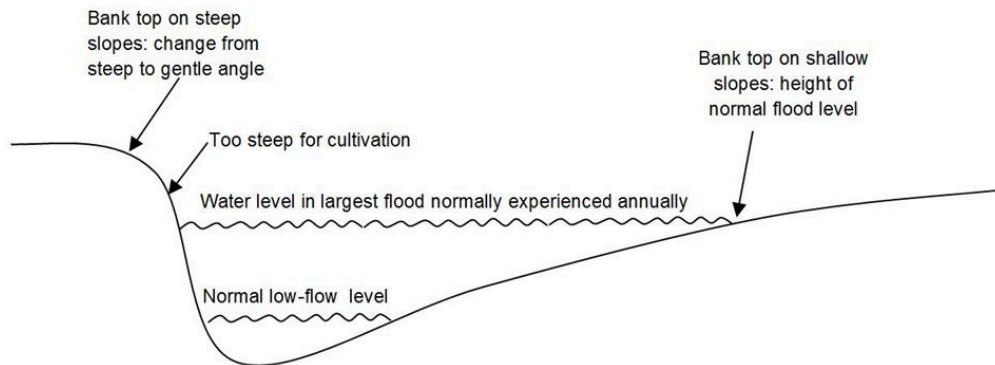
- spot applications of pesticides to control injurious weeds*, invasive species* and, after prior written consent of the Scottish Ministers and / or other statutory bodies, certain other weed species. If you are carrying out this exemption, please be aware of SEPA's requirements for applying pesticides in or near water.

Further information

The location of the bank top depends on the bank profile and can be identified as follows:

1. 'Topping' is permissible within the two meter buffer strip, however Greening rules may apply if this land is also part of your Ecological Focus Area (EFA). Further details on the greening requirements can be found by clicking on the most recent 'Greening guidance' link on the [Basic Payment Scheme page](#).

2. where the bank is fairly steep and an obvious bank face exists, the bank top is the highest part of the bank where the slope angle changes from steep to gentle and cultivation could take place (see below)



3. where the bank face is very shallow and there is no obvious break in slope, the bank top is the height to which water normally reaches during the largest flood normally experienced during the course of a year

Note, the flood height used here excludes the water height reached during rare major floods. The normal flood level height may be difficult to identify because there is not a single indicator that can be used to locate it.

Depending on the site, the following indicators may be used:

- traces left by high-water including flattened vegetation, deposited sediment (typically sands) or a high-water line of washed-up matter such as twigs or leaves
- exposed coarse sediments such as gravel
- changes in the pattern or type of vegetation







*Explanation of terms

'Organic manure' means livestock manure and nitrogen fertiliser derived from organic matter (sewage sludge, composted vegetable waste, etc.)

'Surface water' include coastal water, lochs, rivers, burns, streams and ditches which contain free water and also temporarily dry ditches.

'Chemical fertiliser' means fertiliser which is manufactured by an industrial process.

'Nitrogen fertiliser' includes both organic manures and chemical fertilisers.

'Field Heap' means a store or stack of organic manure which is freestanding, does not slump and does not produce free draining liquid from within the stacked material.

'Top of the bank' depends on the profile of the bank – see additional information images.

'Injurious weeds' are species specified in the Weeds Act 1959: Spear Thistle (*Cirsium vulgare* (Savi) Ten), Creeping or Field thistle (*Cirsium arvense* (L.) Scop.), Curled dock (*Rumex crispus* L.), Broad-leaved dock (*Rumex obtusifolius* L.) and Common Ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea* L.).

'Invasive species' means giant Hogweed (*Heracleum mantegazzianum*), Japanese knotweed (*Fallopia japonica*), Himalayan balsam (*Impatiens glandulifera*) and rhododendron (*Rhododendron ponticum*).

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2 Abstraction of water for irrigation (GAEC 2)

Date published: 2 February, 2016

To see recent changes to this guidance, [see the bottom of this page](#).

Abstraction of water for irrigation

The aim of these rules is to protect water resources by licensing abstraction of water for irrigation.

You must:

1. comply with the authorisation procedures for abstracting water for irrigation. The procedures differ depending on the quantity of water involved:

- if you abstract less than (<) 10 cubic metres of water each day you have to follow General Binding Rule 2 (GBR 2). Complying with GBR 2 means there is no requirement to contact the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) to register or apply for a licence

GBR 2 rules

You must be able to demonstrate that the abstraction is always less than 10 cubic metres in any one day (e.g. by measuring the rate of abstraction) or a means of demonstrating that the maximum volume that could be abstracted cannot exceed (>) 10 cubic metres in any one day.

Water leakage must be kept to a minimum by ensuring that all pipework, storage tanks and other equipment associated with the abstraction and the use of the water are maintained in a state of good repair.

- if you abstract >10 and <50 cubic metres of water each day you have to be registered with SEPA

- if you abstract >50 and <2000 cubic metres of water each day you have to obtain a Simple Licence from SEPA

- if you abstract >2000 cubic metres of water each day you have to obtain a Complex Licence from SEPA

2. comply with all the conditions of a water abstraction licence. Some of the conditions relate to:

- abstraction site
- abstraction periods
- maximum daily abstraction volumes
- you must submit an annual data return even if you don't abstract any water

Further information

Abstracting water for irrigation is covered by the Controlled Activity (CAR) Regulations. For further information, contact SEPA or visit their website by using the following links.

SEPA customer services enquiries - 03000 99 66 99

[CAR abstraction rules](#) (section 4 of 'CAR - A Practical Guide PDF)

[Information on submitting annual data returns](#)

Recent changes

Section	Change	Previous text	New text

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3 Protection of groundwater against pollution (GAEC 3)

Date published: 1 January, 2015

The aim of these rules is to protect groundwater against pollution.

You must:

1. obtain a licence from the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) before disposing of dangerous substances*, such as waste sheep dip* to land
2. comply with the conditions of any licence granted to allow or carry out a disposal of dangerous substances, such as waste sheep dip to land. Some of the conditions relate to:
 - identified disposal sites
 - maximum disposal volume
 - only one disposal per site per year
 - dilution rates
 - keeping disposal records

You must not:

1. cause or permit an activity which is likely to cause pollution of groundwater by an indirect or direct discharge of dangerous substances (eg, an overflowing sheep dipper, a leaking diesel tank, inappropriate disposal of pesticide washings or waste tractor oil)

Further information

Disposing of sheep dip to land is covered by the Controlled Activity (CAR) Regulations, for further information contact SEPA or visit their website using the links below.

SEPA customer services enquiries

Tel: 03000 99 66 99

[Applying for a sheep dip disposal licence \(Licence F\)](#)

[Sheep dipping code of practice](#)

[Diffuse Pollution General Binding Rule \(DP GBR\) 24: operating sheep dipping facilities](#)

***Explanation of terms**

'Substances' means the substances listed in the annex below.

'Sheep dip' includes dips to control external parasites, as well as bloom and purl dips.

Annex

List I

1. organohalogen compounds and substances which may form such compounds in the aquatic environment
2. organophosphorus compounds
3. organotin compounds
4. substances which possess carcinogenic mutagenic or teratogenic properties in or via the aquatic environment
5. mercury and its compounds
6. cadmium and its compounds
7. mineral oils and hydrocarbons
8. cyanides

List II

1. The following metalloids and metals, and their compounds:

- zinc
- copper
- nickel
- chrome
- lead
- selenium
- arsenic
- antimony
- molybdenum
- titanium
- tin
- barium
- beryllium
- boron
- uranium
- vanadium
- cobalt
- thallium
- tellurium
- silver

2. biocides and their derivatives not appearing in List I

3. substances which have a deleterious effect on the taste or odour of groundwater, and compounds liable to cause the formation of such substances in groundwater and to render it unfit for human consumption

4. toxic or persistent organic compounds of silicon, and substances which may cause the formation of such compounds in water, excluding those which are biologically harmless or are rapidly converted in water into harmless substances

5. inorganic compounds of phosphorous and elemental phosphorous

6. fluorides

7. ammonia and nitrites

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4 Minimum soil cover (GAEC 4)

Date published: 1 January, 2015

The aim of this rule is to protect soil against erosion after harvest until the end of winter ('winter' is up to and including the last day of February).

You must:

1. retain the stubble of the previous crop or sow grass or sow another crop, unless:
 - agronomic or weather conditions are such that cultivating land would be detrimental to the use of the land for agricultural production
 - the land is being prepared for sowing the subsequent crop. Secondary cultivations and final seed beds must only be created very close to sowing

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5 Minimum land management reflecting site specific conditions to limit erosion (GAEC 5)

Date published: 22 June, 2018

For recent changes to this guidance, please see the bottom of the page.

The aim of these rules is to protect soil against erosion in certain situations.

You must:

1. limit the erosion of the banks of watercourses, watering points and feeding areas from overgrazing or heavy poaching by livestock
2. put in place appropriate measures to limit soil erosion if agronomic or weather conditions prevent the subsequent crop or a cover from being sown (appropriate measures could include grubbing, sediment traps and sediment fences)

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6 Maintenance of soil organic matter

(GAEC 6)

Date published: 23 December, 2024

For recent changes to this guidance, please see the bottom of the page.

The aim of these requirements is to maintain soil organic matter levels and limit further greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

The requirements cover:

- Rough Grazing or Semi-Natural Areas, Peatlands and Wetlands
- Muirburn
- Stubble Burning

Rough Grazing or Semi-Natural Areas, Peatlands and Wetlands

You must not:

- plough or cultivate rough grazing or other semi-natural areas including peatlands and wetlands unless approved as part of an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)

In addition for areas that are **peatlands and wetlands** you **must not** carry out the following activities:

- reseedling
- new drainage or maintenance of existing drainage systems that causes peatlands or wetlands to dry out
- application of pesticides, fertilisers including manures, lime other soil conditioners
- creating new roads and tracks (include vehicle rutting exposing the soil)
- planting trees (either on peatlands or wetland or on sites where it would compromise the hydrology of adjacent peatlands or wetlands)
- activities that cause damage to the vegetation cover exposing the soil (e.g. excessive poaching/trampling by livestock due to high stocking rates or unsuitable supplementary feeding)
- **and additionally** for wetlands, you **must not** carry out activities which disrupt connections between rivers/water courses and wetlands that will cause wetlands to dry out

Note - these requirements also apply to carrying out any of the listed prohibited activities on land adjacent to peatlands and wetlands which will have the same consequences had the activity been carried out on the peatlands and wetlands e.g. cutting a large ditch on land adjacent to peatlands and wetlands would drain water away from peatlands or wetlands to the same extent had the ditch been cut on the peatlands or wetlands.

Muirburn

You must:

- comply with the requirements of the Muirburn Code as they relate to the maintenance of soil organic matter.

The following would be considered to be a breach of the requirements:

- leaving a fire unattended
- being unable to control a fire or having not made provision for its proper control
- causing damage to any woodland

Stubble burning

You must not:

- burn arable stubble except for disease control or to eliminate plant pests

Further information

The listed prohibited activities for peatlands and wetlands can be carried out if they are required as part of:

- a peatland restoration project
- the installation, alteration or replacement of wind turbines
- permitted development rights
- after prior written consent of the Scottish Ministers

Cutting peat for domestic use is not considered to be damaging activity under these requirements.

Spot applications of pesticides can be applied to control injurious weeds, invasive species and, after prior written consent of the Scottish Ministers and/or other statutory bodies, certain other weed species. If you are carrying out this exemption, please be aware of SEPA's requirements for applying pesticides in or near water.

Active, open drains that are only partly revegetated can be maintained however drains that have become closed and fully obstructed by vegetation cannot be cleared as this would cause peatlands or wetlands to dry out.

All trees planting should be done in line with UK Forestry Standards (UKFS) which is a technical standard for sustainable forest management in the UK. All the legal and good forestry practice requirements and relevant soil, water and habitat guidelines should be met. [Read the current UKFS \(5th edition\)](#).

The EIA regulations restrict 'intensive' agricultural operations on uncultivated or semi-natural land, or large-scale restructuring projects on agricultural land, where the result would have a 'significant' impact on the environment. [More detailed information can be found on the EIA page](#).

Permitted development rights allows certain developments to be carried out without the need for full planning permission. Please note some types of permitted development may require a screening opinion under the EIA regs. [More detailed information can be found on the Farm Advisory Service website](#).

You can read more about the requirements in our [frequently asked questions](#).

Explanation of terms

Rough grazing or other semi-natural areas is land containing semi-natural vegetation including heathland, heather moorland, bog, unimproved grassland and rough grassland which is used or suitable for grazing.

Peatlands are areas where the soil has a peat thickness of at least 50cm and is covered by semi-natural vegetation consisting of sphagnum mosses, cotton grasses, heather, blaeberry, crowberry and cowberry. Uncovered bare areas in between these vegetation types are also peatlands. Please note - this includes peatlands in near-natural, drained, modified and actively eroding condition or where restoration has previously occurred.

A Peatland Areas layer has been added to LPIS viewer to provide an indication of whether there are areas of peatland within farm/croft boundaries. The peatland layer can be accessed by logging on to your RP&S account and can be overlayed on top of your farm/croft boundary. The peatland layer is based on the best information currently available however it can only be used as a guide. If there are any doubts either in terms of the peat depth or vegetative cover further checks will have to be carried out to establish whether your land falls under the definition of Peatlands.

Wetlands are areas of uncultivated and semi-natural land which can be either permanently covered or saturated with water or where the ground conditions are damp and poorly drained. The water can be fed from precipitation, groundwater (water seeping from a spring), from rivers or loch, or seawater. The vegetation is typically dominated by plants such as sedges, rushes, reed, purple moor grass, common saltmarsh grass or cotton grasses, along with a variety of wildflowers; for example, orchids, ragged robin, bogbean, marsh cinquefoil, meadowsweet and marsh marigold. Saltmarshes are a type of coastal wetland which is predominantly fed by sea water but also precipitation and ground water.

EIA relates to [The Agriculture, Land Drainage and Irrigation Projects \(Environmental Impact Assessment\) \(Scotland\) Regulations 2017](#)

Permitted Development relates to [The Town and Country Planning \(General Permitted Development\) \(Scotland\) Order 1992](#). Schedule 1 Class 18 relates to agricultural land.

Fertilisers includes organic manure (livestock manure, sewage sludge, composted vegetable waste, etc.) and chemical fertiliser manufactured by an industrial process

Pesticides includes herbicides, fungicides, insecticides and other biocides.

Soil Conditioners means a substance utilised on land to improve its physical qualities including for the purpose of enhancing growth or vegetation.

Injurious weeds are species specified in the Weeds Act 1959: Spear Thistle (*Cirsiumvulgare* (Savi) Ten), Creeping or Field thistle (*Cirsiumarvense* (L.) Scop.), Curled dock (*Rumexcrispus* L.), Broad-leaved dock (*Rumexobtusifolius* L.) and Common Ragwort (*Seneciojacobaea* L.).

Invasive species means giant Hogweed (*Heracleummantegazzianum*), Japanese knotweed (*Fallopiajaponica*), Himalayan balsam (*Impatiens glandulifera*) and rhododendron (*Rhododendron ponticum*).

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7 Retention of landscape features (GAEC 7)

Date published: 23 December, 2020

For recent changes to this guidance, please see the bottom of the page.

Retention of landscape features

The aim of these rules is to protect landscape features.

You must not:

1. remove or destroy drystone or flagstone dykes, turf and stone-faced banks, walls, hedges, ponds, watercourses or trees (in line, in a group or isolated) without the prior written consent of the Scottish Ministers. Consent is not required to:

- widen field entrances to enable access for livestock or farm machinery
- fell trees which are exempt from or are covered by a 'Felling Licence'* issued by Forestry Commission Scotland
- fell trees that are dead, diseased, damaged or insecurely rooted and because of its condition it poses a risk to human safety

2. trim hedges or lop branches off trees during the bird nesting and rearing season starting on 1 March and ending on 31 August, unless one of the following exemptions applies:-

(1) A hedge or tree may be trimmed/cut from 1 August if the hedge or tree is in a field which will be sown with one of the following crops in that month:-

- oilseed rape
- temporary grass
- another crop subject to prior written consent of Scottish Ministers

This exemption only applies to trimming/cutting the side of the hedge or tree which is adjacent to the oilseed rape, grass, or other crop.

Some birds continue breeding into August and all wild birds, their young, their eggs and active nests are protected by law (Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981). Full information can be found at: [Protected species birds](#).

It is an offence to intentionally or recklessly damage a nest while it is in use or being built and hedge cutting is highly likely to damage nests or cause them to be deserted.

For this reason, before undertaking trimming in August under this exemption, you must check the full length of the hedge for nesting birds. If active nests are found, trimming must be delayed until all birds have fledged.

(2) for road safety* reasons

Hedgelaying* can be carried out up to and including 31 March

3. cultivate land within two metres of the centre line of a hedge unless one of the following exemptions apply:

- cultivating to establish a green cover where one doesn't already exist. A green cover excludes crops that are grown for a commercial purpose, for example arable crops including crops that are under sown with grass
- cultivating to establish a new hedge

4. apply fertilisers (organic manure, chemical or nitrogen) or pesticides within two metres of the centre line of a hedge unless one of the following exemptions apply:

- applications of fertilisers or pesticides to establish a new hedge. This applies from the time the land is prepared for planting the new hedge to the end of the hedge's third growing season

- spot application of pesticides to control injurious weeds*, invasive species* and, after prior written consent of the Scottish Ministers and / or other statutory bodies, certain other weed species.

5. alter, damage or destroy a Scheduled Ancient Monument* without prior written consent of the Scottish Ministers (known as Scheduled Monument Consent (SMC))

Further information

'Topping' is permissible within the two metre buffer strip, however Greening rules may apply if this land is also part of your Ecological Focus Area (EFA). Further details on the greening requirements can be found by clicking on the 'Greening guidance' link on the [Basic Payment Scheme page](#).

Historic Environment Scotland is responsible for safeguarding Scotland's historic environment and promoting its understanding and enjoyment. The document, [Historic Environment Scotland - working on or near Scheduled Monuments \(PDF, Size: 2.9 MB\)](#) gives further information on what land managers can do to look after historic sites.

Scotland's historic environment is a national asset and a vital and finite resource. It's against the law to metal detect on a scheduled monument or protected place. The document [Metal Detecting In Scotland](#) gives further information on the law and other relevant guidance.

To find out whether there are any Scheduled Ancient Monuments on your land, contact Historic Environment Scotland or search their online register.

Tel: 0131 668 8600

[Historic Environment Scotland](#)

Explanation of terms

'Remove or destroy' does not include trimming a hedge or lopping branches off a tree.

'Drystone or flagstone dykes, turf and stone-faced banks, walls' this requirement applies to these features in all states of repair from excellent condition to remnants – see Image 1 below as an example in relation to drystone dykes.

'Hedges' means any hedge which has a length of at least 20 metres or a length of less than 20 metres where it meets another hedge at each end. Any gap of less than 20 metres is treated as being part of the hedge.



Excellent condition, fully stock proof with no gaps



Stock proof and intact with minor defects



Major signs of advancing or potential deterioration



Not stock proof / in early stages dereliction



Derelict



Remnants



'Scheduled Ancient Monument' means a monument listed in the Schedule of monuments compiled and maintained under section 1 of the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979(b).

'Pond' means a small body of still water formed naturally or by artificial means. This excludes lochs, lochans, lakes or reservoirs.

'Trees' means trees with a crown diameter greater than four metres.

'Felling Licence' as provided for under section 9 of the Forestry Act 1967.

'Road safety' means where a hedge or tree:

- overhangs a road, surfaced track or footpath to which the public have access so as to endanger or obstruct the passage of vehicles, pedestrians or horse riders; or
- obstructs or interferes with the view of drivers of vehicles or the light from a public lamp

'Hedgelaying' means a traditional method of cultivating hedges where tall saplings are partly cut through near the base and then bent over so that they lie horizontally to make a thick barrier.

'Injurious weeds' are species specified in the Weeds Act 1959: Spear Thistle (*Cirsium vulgare* (Savi) Ten.), Creeping or Field thistle (*Cirsium arvense* (L.) Scop.), Curled dock (*Rumex crispus* L.), Broad-leaved dock (*Rumex obtusifolius* L.) and Common Ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea* L.).

'Invasive species' means giant hogweed (*Heracleum mantegazzianum*), Japanese Knotweed (*Fallopia japonica*), Himalayan balsam (*Impatiens glandulifera*) and rhododendron (*Rhododendron ponticum*).

Recent changes

Section	Change
Retention of landscape features	Guidance updated to add reference to the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

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