United States
Environmental
Protection Agency

Constructed Treatment Wetlands

Natural wetland systems have often been described as the "earth's kidneys" because they filter pollutants from water that flows through on its way to receiving lakes, streams and oceans. Because these systems can improve water quality, engineers and scientists construct systems that replicate the functions of natural wetlands. Constructed wetlands are treatment systems that use natural processes involving wetland vegetation, soils, and their associated microbial assemblages to improve water quality.

How do treatment wetlands work?

Natural wetlands perform many functions that are beneficial to both humans and wildlife. One of their most important functions is water filtration. As water flows through a wetland, it slows down and many of the suspended solids become trapped by vegetation and settle out. Other pollutants are transformed to less soluble forms taken up by plants or become inactive. Wetland plants also foster the necessary conditions for microorganisms to live there. Through a series of complex processes, these microrganisms also transform and remove pollutants from the water.

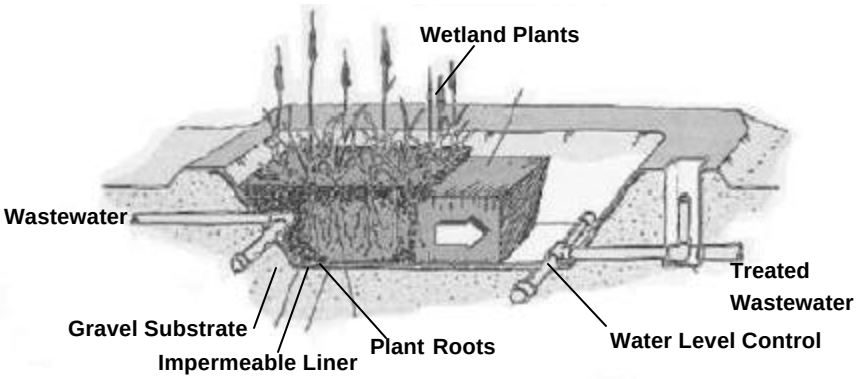
Nutrients, such as nitrogen and phosphorous, are deposited into wetlands from stormwater runoff, from areas where fertilizers or manure have been applied and from leaking septic fields. These excess nutrients are often absorbed by wetland soils and taken up by plants and microorganisms. For example, wetland microbes can convert organic nitrogen into useable, inorganic forms (NO_3 and NH_4) that are necessary for plant growth and into gasses that escape to the atmosphere.

Why build them?

Wetlands are some of the most biologically diverse and productive natural ecosystems in the world. While not all constructed wetlands replicate natural ones, it makes sense to construct wetlands that improve water quality and support wildlife habitat. Constructed wetlands can also be a cost-effective and technically feasible approach to treating wastewater. Wetlands are often less expensive to build than traditional wastewater treatment options, have low operating and maintenance expenses and can handle fluctuating water levels. Additionally, they are aesthetically pleasing and can reduce or eliminate odors associated with wastewater.

A Popular Idea

Designing and building wetlands to treat wastewater is not a new concept. As many as 5,000 constructed wetlands have been built in Europe and about 1,000 are currently in operation in the United States. Constructed treatment wetlands, in some cases involving the maintenance of important wetland habitat, have become particularly popular in the Southwest, where the arid climate makes the wetland habitat supported by these projects an especially precious resource.



Wetland plants and associated microorganisms treat wastewater as it flows through a constructed wetland system.

How are they built?

Constructed wetlands are generally built on uplands and outside floodplains or floodways in order to avoid damage to natural wetlands and other aquatic resources. Wetlands are frequently constructed by excavating, backfilling, grading, diking and installing water control structures to establish desired hydraulic flow patterns. If the site has highly permeable soils, an impervious, compacted clay liner is usually installed and the original soil placed over the liner. Wetland vegetation is then planted or allowed to establish naturally.

Design and Planning Considerations:

If planned and maintained properly, treatment wetlands can provide wastewater treatment and also promote water reuse, wildlife habitat, and public use benefits. Potentially harmful environmental impacts, such as the alteration of natural hydrology, introduction of invasive species and the disruption of natural plant and animal communities can be avoided by following proper planning, design, construction and operating techniques. The following guidelines can help ensure a successful project:

- Construct treatment wetlands, as a rule, on uplands and outside floodplains in order to avoid damage to natural wetlands and other aquatic resources, unless pretreated effluent can be used to restore degraded systems.
- Consider the role of treatment wetlands within the watershed (e.g., potential water quality impacts, surrounding land uses and relation to local wildlife corridors).
- Closely examine site-specific factors, such as soil suitability, hydrology, vegetation, and presence of endangered species or critical habitat, when determining an appropriate location for the project in order to avoid unintended consequences, such as bioaccumulation or destruction of critical habitat.
- Use water control measures that will allow easy response to changes in water quantity, quality, depth and flow.
- Create and follow a long-term management plan that includes regular inspections, monitoring and maintenance.

USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service

This hog operation in Taylor County, Iowa, uses a wetland system constructed on a series of hillside terraces to filter and purify wastewater. Water quality tests indicated that the effluent from the treatment wetland was cleaner than that required for wastewater treatment plants.

Tres Rios Project Improves Water Quality

In 1990, city managers in Phoenix, Arizona, needed to improve the performance of their 91st Avenue Wastewater Treatment Plant to meet new water quality standards issued by the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality. After learning that upgrading their treatment plant might cost as much as $635 million, the managers started to look for a more cost-effective way to polish the treatment plant's wastewater discharge into the Salt River. A preliminary study suggested that the city consider a constructed wetland system that would polish effluent, while supporting high-quality wetland habitat for migratory waterfowl and shorebirds, including endangered species, and protecting downstream residents from flooding at a lower cost than retrofitting their existing treatment plant. As a result, the 12-acre Tres Rios Demonstration Project began in 1993 with assistance from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Bureau of Reclamation and EPA's Environmental Technology Initiative and now receives about two million gallons of effluent per day. The demonstration project was so successful that the city and the Bureau of Reclamation asked EPA for help in expanding the project to a full-scale, 800-acre project. For more information on the Tres Rios Constructed Wetlands Project, visit, http://phoenix.gov/TRESRIOS/

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