

WAC 365-196-830 Protection of critical areas. (1) The act requires the designation of critical areas and the adoption of regulations for the protection of such areas by all counties and cities, including those that do not plan under RCW 36.70A.040. The department has adopted minimum guidelines in chapter 365-190 WAC detailing the process involved in establishing a program to protect critical areas.

(2) Critical areas that must be protected include the following areas and ecosystems:

(a) Wetlands;

(b) Areas of critical recharging effect on aquifers used for potable water;

(c) Fish and wildlife habitat conservation areas;

(d) Frequently flooded areas; and

(e) Geologically hazardous areas.

(3) "Protection" in this context means preservation of the functions and values of the natural environment, or to safeguard the public from hazards to health and safety.

(4) Although counties and cities may protect critical areas in different ways or may allow some localized impacts to critical areas, or even the potential loss of some critical areas, development regulations must preserve the existing functions and values of critical areas. Avoidance is the most effective way to protect critical areas. If development regulations allow harm to critical areas, they must require compensatory mitigation of the harm. Development regulations may not allow a net loss of the functions and values of the ecosystem that includes the impacted or lost critical areas.

(5) Counties and cities must include the best available science in developing policies and development regulations to protect functions and values of critical areas. See chapter 365-195 WAC.

(6) Functions and values must be evaluated at a scale appropriate to the function being evaluated. Ecosystem functions and values operate on varying geographic scales ranging from site-specific to watershed and even regional scales. Some critical areas, such as wetlands and fish and wildlife habitat conservation areas, may constitute ecosystems or parts of ecosystems that transcend the boundaries of individual parcels and jurisdictions, so that protection of their function, and values should be considered on a larger scale.

(7) Protecting some critical areas may require using both regulatory and nonregulatory measures. When impacts to critical areas are from development beyond jurisdictional control, counties and cities are encouraged to use regional approaches to protect functions and values. It is especially important to use a regional approach when giving special consideration to conservation or protection measures necessary to preserve or enhance anadromous fisheries. Conservation and protection measures may address land uses on any lands within a jurisdiction, and not only lands with designated critical areas.

(8) Local government may develop and implement alternative means of protecting critical areas from some activities using best management practices or a combination of regulatory and nonregulatory programs.

(a) When developing alternative means of protection, counties and cities must assure no net loss of functions and values and must include the best available science.

(b) Local governments must review and, if needed, revise their development regulations to assure the protection of critical areas where agricultural activities take place.

(c) Local governments shall not broadly exempt agricultural activities from their critical areas regulations.

(d) Counties participating in the voluntary stewardship program must review and, if needed, revise their development regulations not governed by the voluntary stewardship program, except as provided in RCW 36.70A.130(8).

(9) In designing development regulations and nonregulatory programs to protect designated critical areas, counties and cities should endeavor to make such regulations and programs fit together with regional, state and federal programs directed to the same environmental, health, safety and welfare ends. Local plans and policies may in some respects be adequately implemented by adopting the provisions of such other programs as part of the local regulations.

[Statutory Authority: RCW 36.70A.050 and 36.70A.190. WSR 23-08-037, § 365-196-830, filed 3/29/23, effective 4/29/23; WSR 17-20-100, § 365-196-830, filed 10/4/17, effective 11/4/17; WSR 10-03-085, § 365-196-830, filed 1/19/10, effective 2/19/10.]