CW

Constructed Wetlands

Description

Constructed wetlands may be used as a method of stormwater treatment if designed and applied correctly, and are highly desirable as wildlife habitats. Wetlands can be very efficient in removing pollutants under some conditions; however, they should be used in conjunction with another BMP until firmly established and pollutant efficiency is verified. With careful attention to design and maintenance, this practice is likely to provide significant reductions in most targeted constituents.

Selection Criteria

Constructed wetlands would likely be acceptable in the following applications:

- Small outfalls for which adequate water and soil conditions will allow the establishment and permanent growth of wetland vegetation
- Industrial and commercial project sites with ample space, for which adequate water and soil conditions will allow the establishment and permanent growth of wetland vegetation.
- Near greenways, parks, landscaping, recreational areas, or other aesthetic locations.

The regulatory definition of a wetland is an area that is inundated or saturated by surface water or groundwater at a frequency and duration sufficient to support a prevalence of vegetation typically adapted for life in saturated soil conditions, such as a swamp, marsh, bog, or vernal spring.

Natural wetlands are regulated by the Tennessee Department of Environment & Conservation in conjunction with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Wetlands can be identified through the presence of certain plants, soil types, insects, etc., in addition to the presence of water or poor drainage. Wetlands may be seasonal, so that it can be very difficult to recognize a wetland during the summer months. Do not disturb natural wetlands without express written permission from TDEC and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Visit the TDEC website for more details on how to obtain an Aquatic Resource Alteration Permit: http://www.state.tn.us/environment/permits/

In contrast, constructed wetlands are built specifically for treating stormwater runoff, and are not created as mitigation for the loss of natural wetlands. Consequently, constructed wetlands do not necessarily have to meet the stricter standards necessary to replace natural wetlands. Constructed wetlands use larger areas than other types of stormwater treatment BMPs. For small sites with advantageous water and soil conditions, concrete retaining walls can be used for one or more sides to save space.

The term “constructed wetland” may also refer to a method of treating small amounts of wastewater and sanitary sewage, typically from a single residence or a small group of residences. Within the context of the BMP Manual, the term “constructed wetland” refers to the treatment of stormwater runoff only. Treatment of wastewater and sanitary sewage is provided by the Moccasin Bend Wastewater Treatment Plant and regulated by TDEC.

Constructed wetlands remove dissolved phosphorous, nitrogen, and other nutrients both directly (for aquatic plants) and through the soil (for rooted plants). In addition, wetland vegetation would uptake heavy metals, toxic materials, and other pollutants.

A constructed wetland with additional capacity for extended detention is very similar to a wet detention basin, except with different types of vegetation. Guidelines in this BMP apply to the portion of constructed wetlands below the normal pool elevation. See Section 7.3, Wet Detention Basin, for typical berms, outlet structures, and grading details that are generally applicable to constructed wetlands also.

Design Considerations

The detailed design of a constructed wetland should generally be accomplished by a team that includes a hydrologist or engineer for hydrologic/hydraulic/water balance analyses and a wetland ecology specialist for selecting vegetation and habitat parameters. The following basic guidelines can assist in making preliminary plans and layouts for a constructed wetland.

Size

The overall goal for constructed wetlands is to treat design storm of 3/4 inch rainfall. For storms that are smaller than 3/4 inch of rainfall, the normal pool elevation will not be completely replaced by newer stormwater during the storm event. This means that in most instances, the average water residence time within the wetland is longer than the average time between storm events, greatly enhancing pollutant removal efficiency of the constructed wetland. The recommended treatment volume and the recommended surface area to be used for the normal pool elevation is:

$$V_T = C \quad (0.75 / 12) \quad (43{,}560) \quad (A_D)$$

$$A_S = 0.02 \quad A_D$$

V_T = Treatment volume (cubic feet)
C = Rational runoff coefficient (dimensionless)

(see Standard Handbook of Environmental Engineering (2nd edition), Robert A. Corbitt, 1999; and Land Development for Engineers, Thomas R. Dion, 1993, and others)

A_D = Contributing drainage area (acres)
A_S = Surface area of constructed wetland (acres)

Using recommended values for V_T and A_S above, the average depth of wetland (D) expressed in feet is:

$$D = 5.21 \quad C$$

Table 1
Size Criteria for Stormwater Wetlands

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Surface area = percentage of area at normal water pool Elevation (without stormwater surge)

Depth range = depth from normal water pool elevation

Volume = percentage of total volume below normal water pool elevation

A. Shallow Marsh	Surface Area	Depth Range	Approx. Volumes
Forebay	5 %	18” to 72”	10 %
High marsh	** 45 %	0” to 6”	25 %
Low marsh	40 %	6” to 18”	45 %
Deep water	5 %	12” to 48”	10 %
Micropool	5 %	18” to 72”	10 %

B. Deep Marsh	Surface Area	Depth Range	Approx. Volumes
Forebay	5 %	18” to 72”	5 %
High marsh	** 25 %	0” to 6”	10 %
Low marsh	25 %	6” to 18”	15 %
Deep water	40 %	12” to 48”	60 %
Micropool	5 %	18” to 72”	10 %

**The surface area of high marsh should be maximized whenever possible depending upon the types of vegetation or fish that are selected.

<u>Layout</u>

Table 1 shows a basic allocation of different zones within a constructed wetland. Zone percentages for two basic types of wetland (designated as Shallow Marsh and Deep Marsh) can be adjusted to match the target volumes and to support various types of desired vegetation. The zone designated as high marsh (0” to 6” deep) is highly desirable; it generally, contains thicker vegetation than low marsh zones. Ecological complexity is promoted by varying water depth through the vegetated area rather than keeping the depth uniform.

The length-to-width ratio of the constructed wetland should generally be at least 2:1, although a 1:1 ratio is usually acceptable with baffles, islands, internal berms, or other flow barriers. Dry-weather flow paths should meander back and forth throughout the wetland, as shown in Figures 1 and 2, to maximize contact time with soils and vegetation. Distribute flows equally throughout the wetland and avoid dead spaces.

Prevent flow shortcuts by anticipating possible locations; erosion control matting and other geotextile applications may be useful to “armor” shortcut locations.

Islands reduce the total treatment volume (below the normal pool elevation) by a small amount that is usually negligible. Overgrowth of vegetation may actually cause a more significant reduction in storage volume, and can be a factor in whether to harvest vegetation within a constructed wetland. It is important to provide plenty of shade to the wetland during the summer months, since shallow depths will generally allow the water to get warm and thus degrade the downstream environment for many cold-water fish and other organisms.

It is beneficial to incorporate cascades into the wetland layout, possibly by having more than one water surface elevation. A cascade can be placed on one fork of a flow path and not on another. A cascade provides aeration and increases oxygen levels in the water. Oxygen is needed for the digestion of organic nutrients and particles in the water. Cascades are aesthetically pleasing and can be fashioned in many ways.

Other layout considerations include maximum side slopes of 4:1 (H:V) and preferably side slopes which are 10:1 (H:V) or flatter. On very small facilities, retaining walls may be used to conserve space. There must be provisions for vehicle access to the forebay (which requires period cleaning) and to the micropool (which may require maintenance and water level adjustments). Provide adequate freeboard (typically 1 foot) to prevent ponding stormwater or flood damage on adjacent properties.

The forebay may be partially replaced by a baffle box, stormwater quality inlets (media filtration or floatables skimmer) or other means to remove debris and coarse sediments. If a detention basin is constructed upstream from the wetland, then the forebay may be eliminated altogether.

Water Balance

The water balance for the constructed wetland must be examined using typical values (maximum, average, minimum) for rainfall, temperature, humidity, water table, evaporation rate, and infiltration rate. The 30-year averages, published by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, are broken down for each month of the year and represent a good starting point for water balance calculations. Evaporation rates may depend on the amount of sunlight or shade, prevailing wind directions, types of windbreaks (fences can be very beneficial), and other factors. Infiltration rates can be reduced or eliminated by using a geosynthetic liner, clay, or concrete. Infiltration rates can be significant in karst areas, sinkholes, fractured bedrock, sands, or gravels.

In particular, the water balance must be computed for dry-weather scenarios such as late summer and early fall. A groundwater baseflow or stream baseflow is very favorable but may not be present during extended periods of dry weather. Drinking water or treated process water can be added during dry weather provided that water is dechlorinated prior to use within the wetland.

Soils

The soil must be suitable for wetland vegetation. Hydric soils (soils which are normally saturated) are preferable and can be identified by wetland experts using color and texture. If necessary, organic soils must be imported to the site and placed up to

24 inches deep. The soil must have an affinity for phosphorus, for which minerals containing aluminum and iron ions are typically desirable. Do not use soils that contain large concentrations of phosphorus or heavy metals, as these soils may cause concentrations of contaminants to increase in the overlying water.

Minimize water loss by preventing infiltration through the wetland bottom. Depending on the type of soil, this can be accomplished by compaction, incorporating clay into the soil, or an artificial geosynthetic liner (at least 30 mil thick, UV resistant, durable throughout extreme temperatures). Using gravel as the substrate may be a suitable approach in small facilities. Because gravel is lacking in nutrients, emergent species will have to take nutrients directly from the water (Reddy) (Thutt). However, harvesting may be more practical if plants can be easily removed from gravel.

Vegetation

The overall design of vegetation for a constructed wetland should be performed by a qualified wetland ecologist with adequate experience and training. The wetland ecologist should also be involved during construction and installation in order to achieve best results. Basic types of wetland vegetation (also called hydrophytic vegetation or hydrophytes) can be classified as floating, emergent, and submergent. Wetland vegetation species should be selected based upon stress tolerance and hardiness to seasonal variations in water availability. During periods of dry weather, there must be sufficient water to avoid complete desiccation of plant roots.

Placing rooted wetland species from nursery stock throughout the wetland can be expensive when compared to a wet detention basin. However, relying on native volunteer plants to establish themselves would delay complete coverage for several years. Delayed coverage may allow the invasion of undesirable species or dominance by one or two species (such as cattails) which tend to flourish in disturbed conditions. Vegetation can also be established by taking donor soils from existing wetlands, but the soils must be transported and handled carefully. The best times to establish vegetation are typically spring and fall.

Common wetland plants include: arrowhead, bulrush, canarygrass, cattails, duckweed, ferns, marshgrass, pond lilies, pondweed, rushes, sedges, skunk cabbage, and woolgrass. Common wetland trees include: alder, ash, cottonwood, dogwood, and some maples. Trees should not have acidic leaves (such as oak trees) or undesirable fruit or nuts. Decaying leaves and stems provide food for many types of insects and other invertebrates, which in turn become food for fish, reptiles, amphibians, and mammals. Trees provide habitats for many birds and animals. Trees also tend to discourage migrating birds (geese and ducks), which severely degrade water quality.

It can be expected that soil adsorption will continue at a slower pace during the winter. For instance, the minimum temperature for cattails, sedges, and bulrushes to function effectively is 50°, 57° and 60° Fahrenheit, respectively. It has been observed during fall and winter months that pollutants may actually be released at a greater rate than being absorbed. The net effect over a 12-month period may be that a constructed wetland is no more effective than a wet pond, particularly with regard to the removal of dissolved phosphorus and metals.

Phosphorous removal has been observed for wastewater applications (rather than stormwater treatment) to occur during the first two or three years, but then declines thereafter and may actually become negative. This effect is thought to be the result of plants reaching maximum density, for which some researchers recommend that mature plant material should be harvested and removed from the wetlands. The uptake of heavy metals is not affected by plant density and maturity. And nitrogen removal does not degrade over time either, because it is a bacteriological process. The nitrogen removal process is very temperature-dependent and therefore much slower in winter.

Annual harvesting of rooted vegetation may or may not be practical or effective at reducing seasonal losses of nutrients and prolonging the life of the constructed wetland facility (EPA 1988). The benefits of harvesting may depend upon the wetland species (Suziki). Placing rooted vegetation in gravel beds rather than soil may make harvesting practical. If harvesting is to be done, it should occur twice per season:

1) in the early summer when nutrient content in the plant material is at its peak
2) in the early fall as the growing season comes to a close.

Vegetation is planted only after the constructed wetland has been completely created, and then carefully surveyed and regraded. Flood for at least two weeks to ensure wet soils. Drain water from the constructed wetland 2 to 3 days prior to planting. Plant vegetation at staked locations that correspond to the proper normal pool depths. Allow water to reflood the wetland within 24 hours after planting.

Wildlife

It is beneficial to provide wildlife habitats within and around a constructed wetland. Fences can protect a wetland from human impacts, prevent access by domestic animals, such as dogs and cats, and protect children. A particular concern about constructed wetlands is that mosquitoes will breed and thrive. Many types of birds and bats are very useful in reducing mosquitoes. Fish can help to control mosquitoes if a deep pool area is included for fish to reside during dry weather. Typical measures include:

- Mix of deciduous / evergreen trees
- Exposed trunks, snags or logs
- Islands within constructed wetland

Maintenance

Inspect wetlands at least twice a year and after each extreme storm event. Remove trash and foreign debris. Remove nuisance vegetation and animals if present. Repair or replace areas of erosion or damage. Check sediment deposits and remove if necessary. Clean deposits from the forebay when a loss of capacity is significant, probably every 3 to 5 years depending on the land use, or if concentrations of heavy metals or other pollutants in sediments are reaching a level of concern, typically every 5 to 10 years.

In general, a constructed wetland should be preceded by other types of stormwater treatment BMPs to remove oil, grease, toxic sediments, heavy metals, and coarse sediment. Inspect upstream controls at least twice a year and after each extreme storm event. Perform required maintenance and repairs, particularly for oil/water separators and for media filtration inlets.

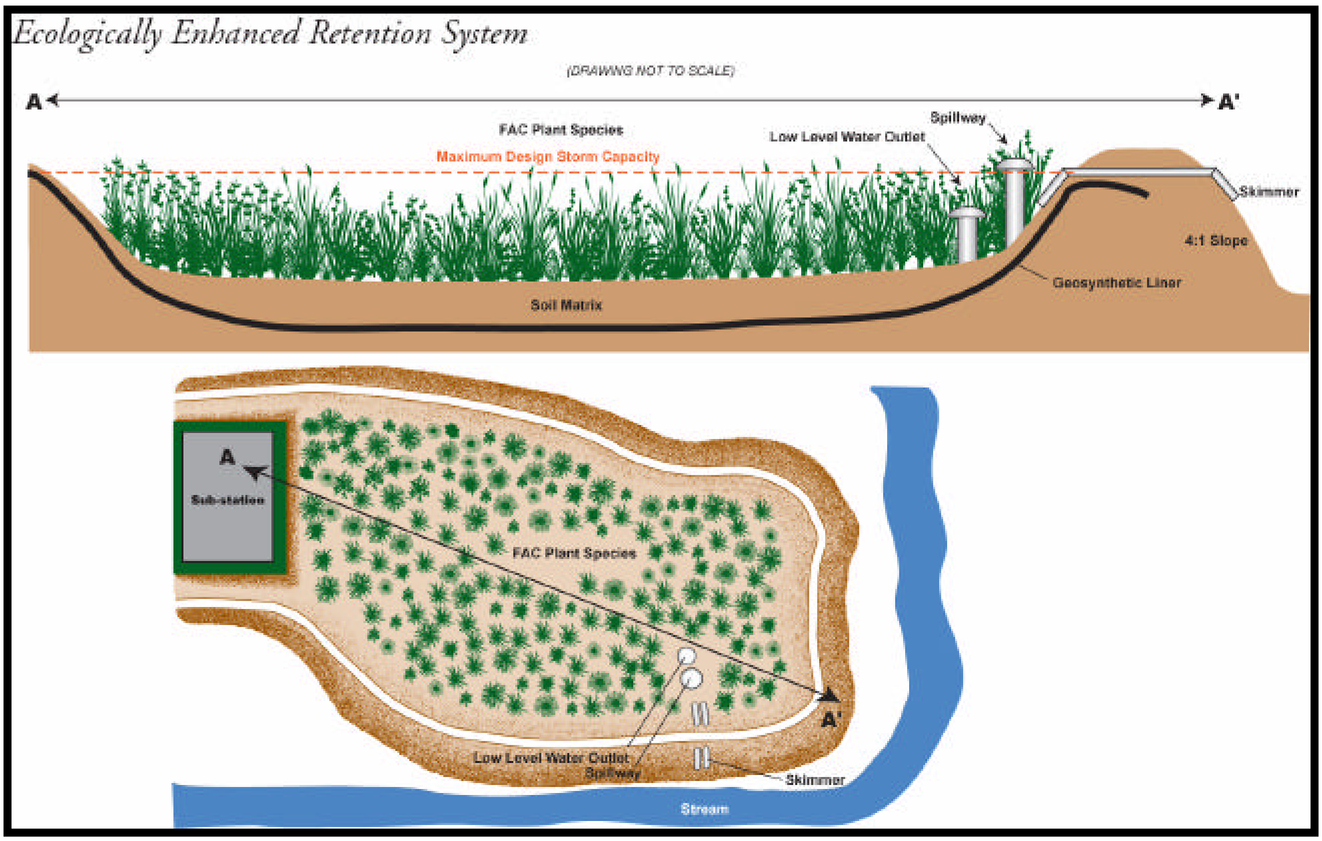
Removal of sediment depends on the accumulation rate and available storage, in addition to other factors such as watershed size, facility sizing, construction upstream, industrial or commercial activities upstream, etc. The types of sediment should be identified before removal and disposal. Special attention or sampling should be given to sediments accumulated from industrial, manufacturing or heavy commercial sites, fueling centers or automotive maintenance areas, parking areas, or other areas where pollutants are suspected. Treat sediment as potentially hazardous soil until proven otherwise.

Limitations

There are many limitations to the task of establishing a self-functioning ecological system such as a constructed wetland. A few limitations are listed here:

- Must have the correct soil types and the appropriate vegetation.
- Requires adequate surface area and volumes to function effectively.
- Difficult to construct and requires careful attention to detail.
- Must have adequate flow to maintain water level.
- Requires constant monitoring to remove nuisance vegetation and animals.
- Burrowing animals can damage geosynthetic liners and increase infiltration.
- Concern for mosquitoes, snakes, spiders and other undesirable wildlife.

Figure 1 Wet Meadow



(Wolf)

Figure 2
Wet Meadow / Open Water Combination

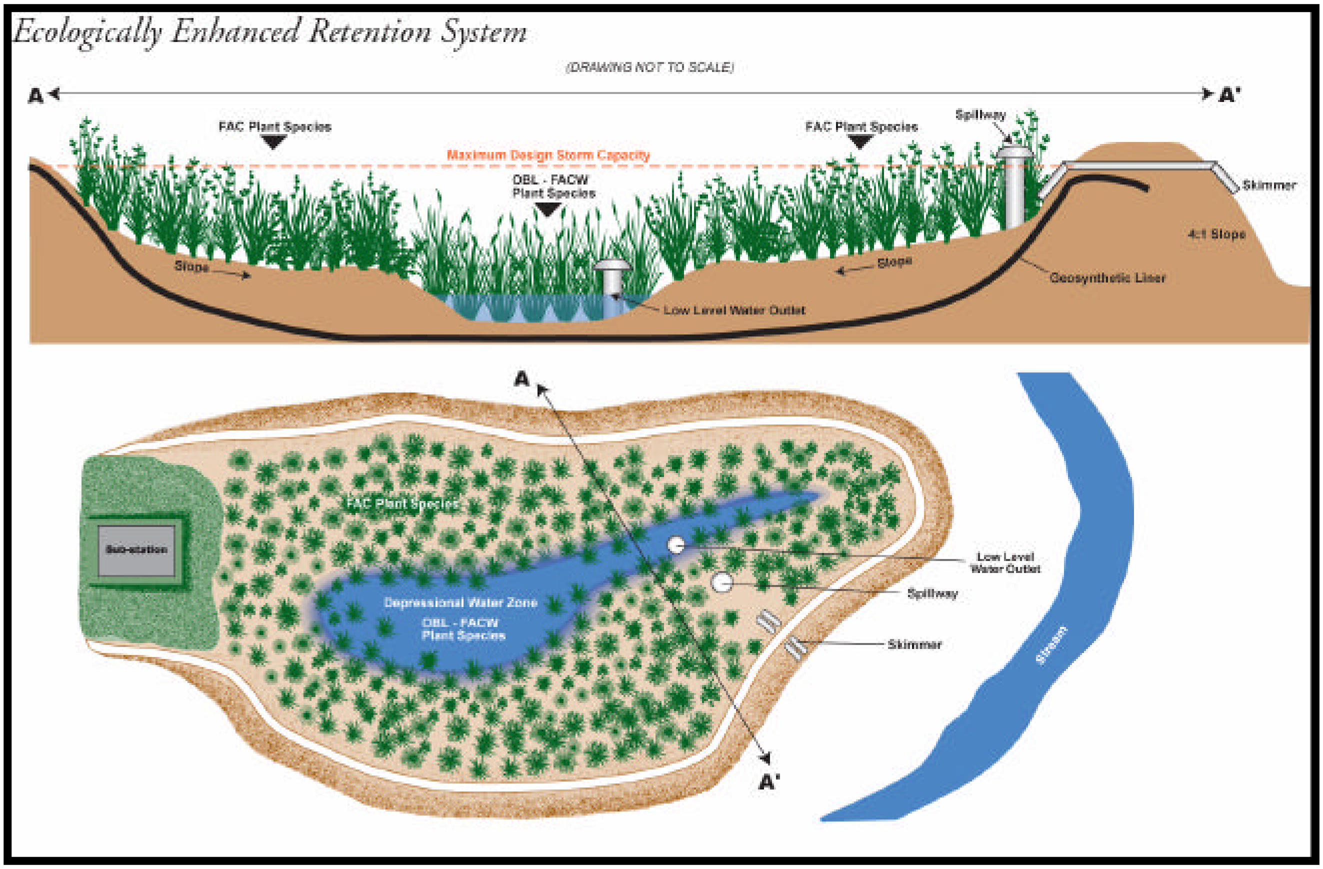


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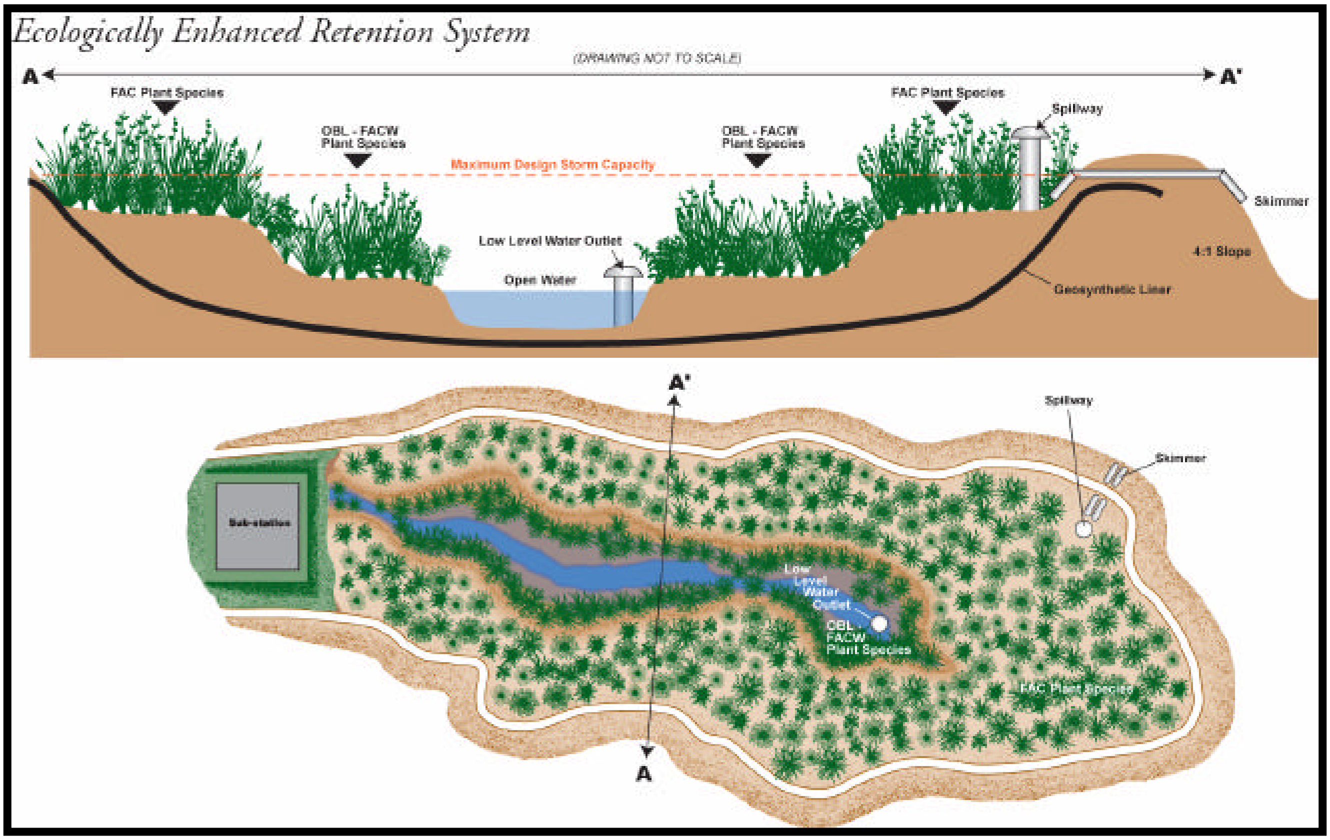
Figure 3
Terraced Wetland



(Wolf)

Photos 1 – 2 Constructed Wetlands

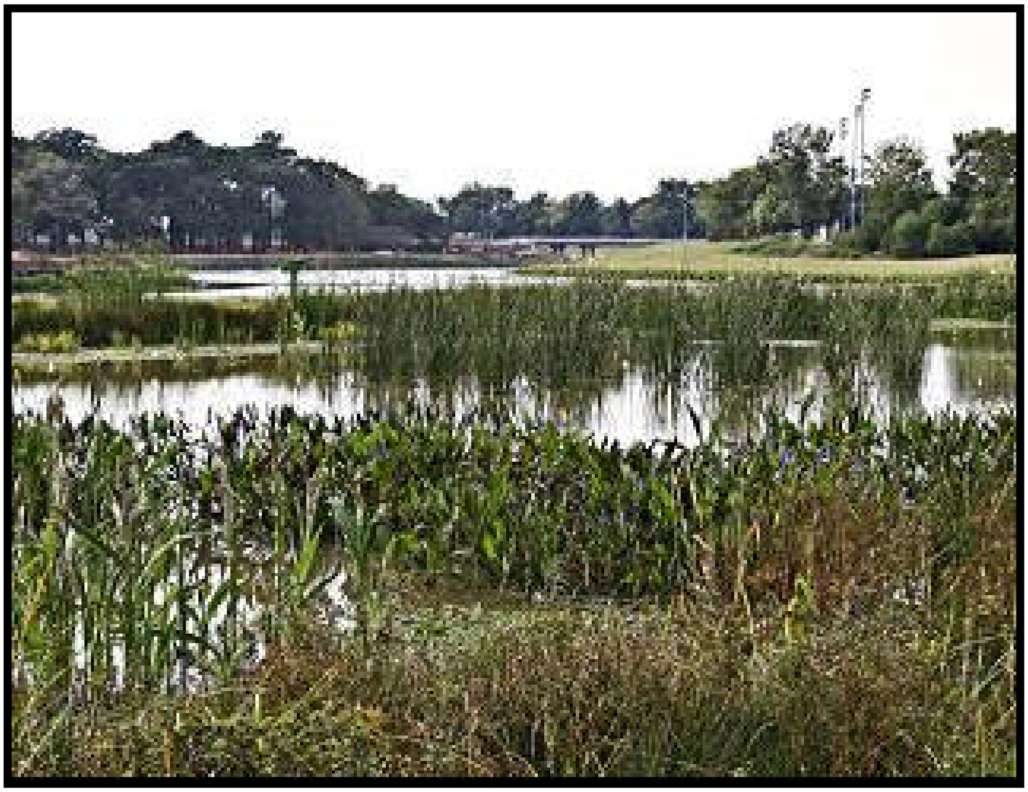


Figure 4
Conceptual Wetland Plan and Profile

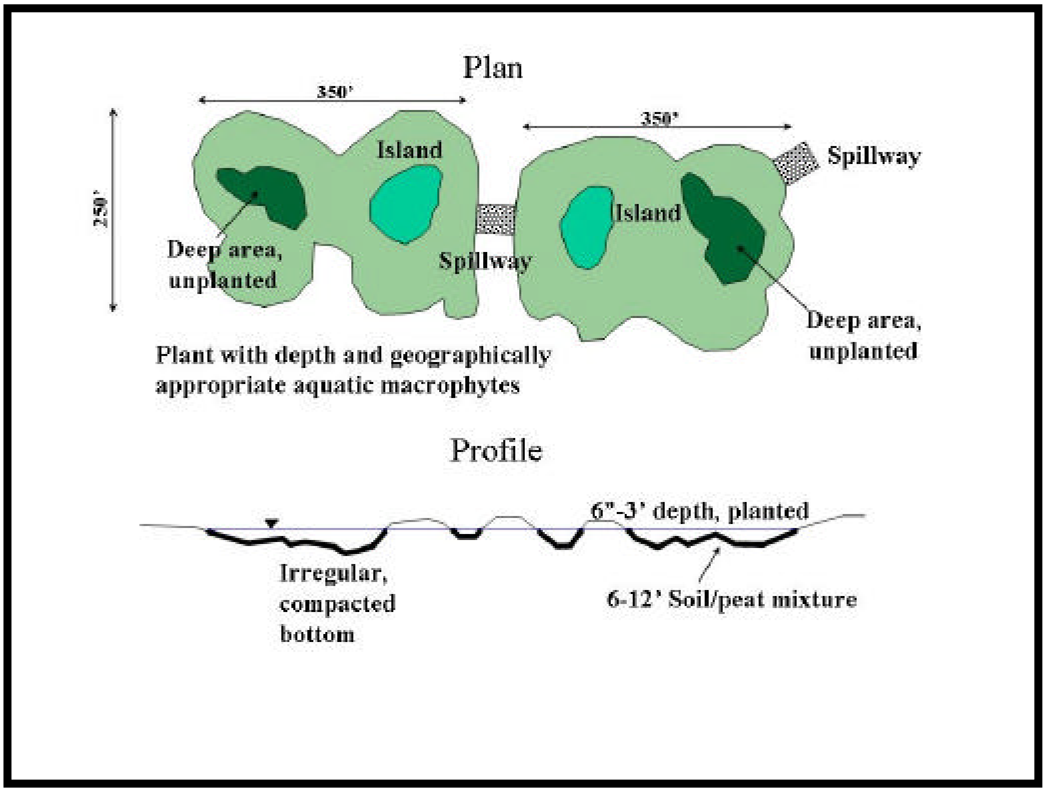


Figure 5
Typical Constructed Wetland

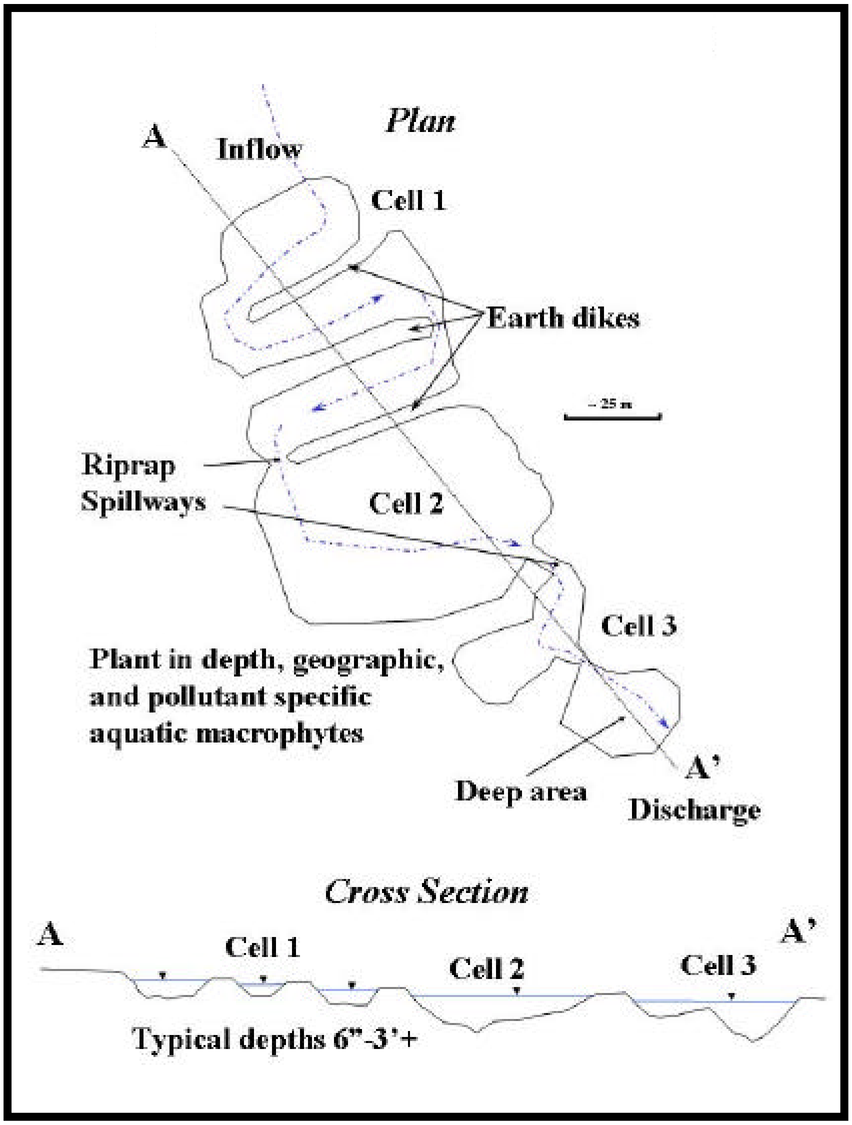
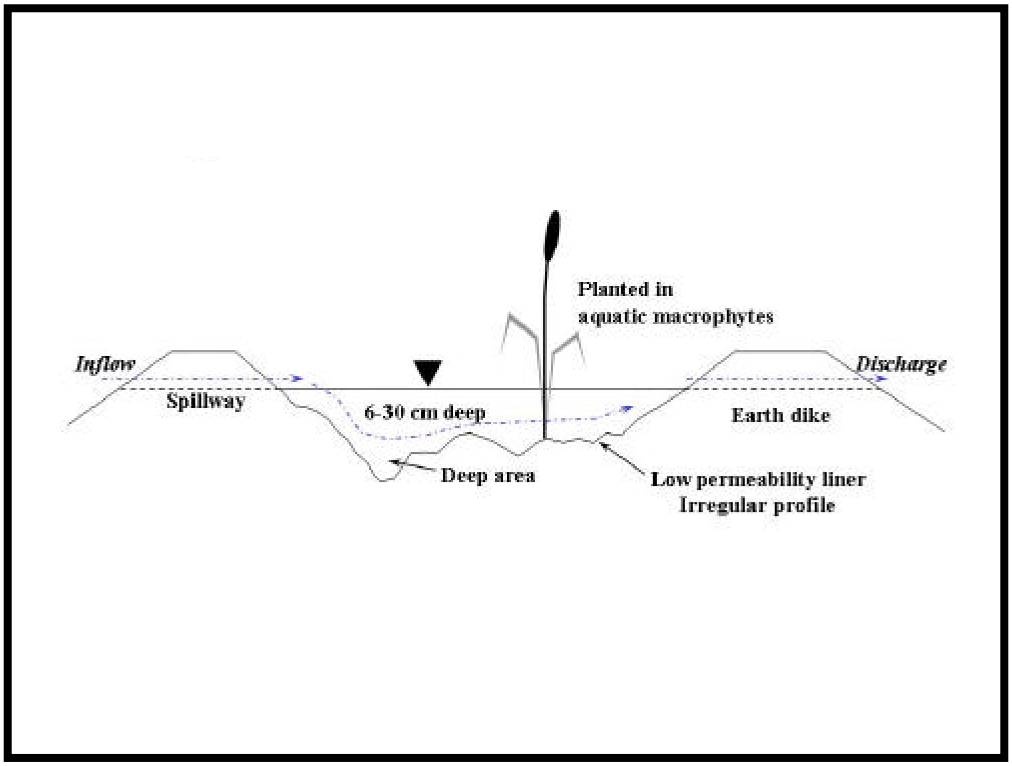


Figure 6
Typical Constructed Aerobic Wetland



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