

# Mulching

EPA - Water: Best Management Practices

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Minimum Measure: Construction Site Stormwater Runoff Control

Subcategory: Erosion Control

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## Description

Mulching is an erosion control practice that uses materials such as grass, hay, wood chips, wood fibers, straw, or gravel to stabilize exposed or recently planted soil surfaces. Mulching is highly recommended and is most effective when used in conjunction with vegetation. In addition to stabilizing soils, mulching can reduce stormwater velocity and improve the infiltration of runoff. Mulching can also aid plant growth by holding seeds, fertilizers, and topsoil in place, preventing birds from eating seeds, retaining moisture, and insulating plant roots against extreme temperatures.

Mulch matting is made from materials such as jute or other wood fibers that are formed into sheets and are more stable than loose mulch. Use jute and other wood fibers, plastic, paper, or cotton individually or combine them into mats to hold mulch to the ground. Use netting to stabilize soils while plants are growing; although, netting does not retain moisture or insulate against extreme temperatures. Mulch tackifiers made of asphalt or synthetic materials are sometimes used instead of netting to bind loose mulches.

## Applicability

Mulching is often used in areas where vegetation cannot be established. Mulching can provide immediate and inexpensive erosion control. On steep slopes and critical areas, such as those near waterways, use mulch matting with netting or anchoring to hold it in place. Use mulches on seeded and planted areas where slopes are steeper than 2:1 or where sensitive seedlings require insulation from extreme temperatures or moisture retention.

## Siting and Design Considerations

When possible, natural mulches should be used for erosion control and plant material establishment. Suggested materials include loose straw, netting, wood cellulose, or agricultural silage. All materials should be free of seed. Anchor loose hay or straw by applying tackifier, stapling netting over the top, or crimping with a mulch crimping tool. Materials that are heavy enough to stay in place (for example, gravel or bark or wood chips on flat slopes) do not need anchoring. Other examples of organic mulches include hydraulic mulch products with 100 percent post-consumer paper content, yard trimming composts, and wood mulch from recycled stumps and tree parts. Use inorganic mulches such as pea gravel or crushed granite in unvegetated areas.

Mulches may or may not require a binder, netting, or tacking. To ensure effective use of netting and matting material, keep firm, continuous contact between the materials and the soil. If there is no contact, the material will not hold the soil and erosion will occur underneath the material. Grading is not necessary before mulching. Use biodegradable

netting, if possible.

There must be adequate coverage to prevent erosion, washout, and poor plant establishment. If an appropriate tacking agent is not applied, or is applied in insufficient amounts, mulch will be lost to wind and runoff. The channel grade and liner must be appropriate for the amount of runoff, or the channel bottom will erode. Also, apply hydromulch in spring, summer, or fall to prevent deterioration of mulch before plants can become established. Table 1 presents guidelines for installing mulches.

Table 1. Typical mulching materials and application rates

Material	Rate per acre	Requirements	Notes
<b>Organic Mulches</b>			
Straw	1 - 2 tons	Dry, unchopped, unweathered; avoid weeds	Spread by hand or machine; must be tacked or tied down
Wood fiber or wood cellulose	½ - 1 ton		Use with hydroseeder; may be used to tack straw; do not use in hot, dry weather
Wood chips	5 - 6 tons	Air dry; add fertilizer N, 12 lb/ton	Apply with blower, chip handler, or by hand; not for fine turf areas
Bark	35 yd <sup>3</sup>	Air dry, shredded, or hammermilled, or chips	Apply with mulch blower, chip handler, or by hand; do not use asphalt tack
<b>Nets and mats</b>			
Jute net	Cover area	Heavy, uniform; woven of single jute yarn; use with organic mulch	Withstands water flow
Excelsior (wood fiber) mat	Cover area		
Fiberglass roving	½ - 1 ton	Continuous fibers of drawn glass bound together with a non-toxic agent	Apply with compressed air ejector; tack with emulsified asphalt at a rate of 25 - 35 gal/1000 ft <sup>2</sup>

### **Limitations**

Mulching, matting, and netting might delay seed germination because the cover changes soil surface temperatures. The mulches themselves are subject to erosion and may be washed away in a large storm. Maintenance is necessary to ensure that mulches provide effective erosion control.

### **Maintenance Considerations**

Anchor mulches to resist wind displacement. When protection is no longer needed, remove netting and compost it or dispose of it in a landfill. Inspect mulched areas frequently to identify areas where it has loosened or been removed, especially after rainstorms. Reseed these areas, if necessary, and replace the mulch cover immediately. Apply mulch binders at rates recommended by the manufacturer. If washout, breakage, or erosion occurs, repair, reseed and remulch surfaces, and install new netting. Continue inspections until vegetation is firmly established.

### Effectiveness

Mulching effectiveness varies according to the type of mulch used. Soil loss reduction for different mulches ranges from 53 to 99.8 percent. Water velocity reductions range from 24 to 78 percent. Table 2 shows soil loss and water velocity reductions for different mulch treatments.

Table 2. Measured reductions in soil loss for different mulch treatments  
(Source: Harding, 1990, as cited in USEPA, 1993)

Mulch characteristics	Soil loss reduction (%)	Water velocity reduction (bare soil)
100% wheat straw/top net	97.5	73
100% wheat straw/two nets	98.6	56
70% wheat straw/30% coconut fiber	98.7	71
70% wheat straw/30% coconut fiber	99.5	78
100% coconut fiber	98.4	77
Nylon monofilament/two nets	99.8	74
Nylon monofilament/rigid/bonded	53.0	24
Vinyl monofilament/flexible/bonded	89.6	32
Curled wood fibers/top net	90.4	47
Curled wood fibers/two nets	93.5	59
Antiwash netting(jute)	91.8	59
Interwoven paper and thread	93.0	53
Uncrimped wheat straw, 2,242 kg/ha	84.0	45
Uncrimped wheat straw, 4,484 kg/ha	89.3	59

### Cost Considerations

Costs of seed and mulch average \$1,500 per acre and range from \$800 to \$3,500 per acre (USEPA, 1993).