



Critical Areas

What are critical areas?

Critical areas are areas or features with significant environmental value or lands with natural hazards.

There are five types of critical areas:

1. Wetlands
2. Critical aquifer recharge areas
3. Fish and wildlife habitat conservation areas
4. Frequently flooded areas
5. Geologically hazardous areas

Critical areas are regulated in order to protect the functions and values they provide to humans and the environment and to protect shoreline residents and structures from hazards that critical areas may pose.

How does the SMP regulate critical areas?

SMP regulations apply to all uses and development activities proposed in or near critical areas that are located within shoreline jurisdiction. SMP regulations also apply to critical area buffers in shoreline jurisdiction. Buffers are the vegetated areas adjacent to critical areas that protect them from development and protect developments from safety hazards, such as flooding or landslides.

Critical areas outside of shoreline jurisdiction are regulated under Title 19 of the Skamania County Code. The general location of critical areas is depicted on maps on file with Skamania County and the State of Washington.

Projects that take place in shoreline critical areas or their buffers must be reviewed for consistency with the critical areas regulations in Section 3.4 of the SMP, even if those projects are exempt from the requirement for a shoreline substantial development permit.

Critical area reports

If your project will impact a critical area and/or its buffer, you must submit a critical area report prepared by a qualified professional.

In general, critical area reports follow the same pathway:

- ➔ Identify the existing on-site conditions (e.g., the type, location, and quality of the critical area).
- ➔ Calculate the impacts that the proposed use or development will have on the critical area if development in the critical area is unavoidable.
- ➔ Propose mitigation for the impacts. Mitigation starts with planning/ designing your project to avoid impacts, then actions to offset unavoidable impacts such as replanting native vegetation within buffers and/or critical areas.



Quick Reference

This handout should be used in partnership with the adopted [Skamania County Shoreline Master Program](#) and the Property Owners Handbook.

SMP Reference

- + **Critical Areas:**
[Section 3.4](#)
- + **Environmental Protection and No Net Loss:**
[Section 3.5](#)



Questions







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The critical area report must meet certain requirements, which can vary by the type of critical area. Further, projects located in more than one critical area may require more than one report. All reports must be prepared by a qualified professional meeting the requirements listed in the SMP.

Critical Areas Report Requirements

Critical Area	Report Requirements
All Critical Areas	 SMP Section 3.4.5
Wetlands	 SMP Section 3.4.6.3
Critical Aquifer Recharge Areas	 SMP Section 3.4.7.3
Fish and Wildlife Habitat Conservation Areas	 SMP Section 3.4.8.3
Frequently Flooded Areas and Channel Migration Zones	 SMP Section 3.4.9.2
Geologically Hazardous Areas	 SMP Section 3.4.10.2

Critical area impacts and mitigations are reviewed concurrently with shoreline permits (substantial development, variances, or conditional use permits) or letters of exemption. Staff will issue a decision and include comments and/or conditions of approval. For exemptions that do not involve in-water work, critical areas compliance will be determined during the building permit review process.

All critical areas reports should be submitted with your application for a shoreline permit or exemption.

Mitigating development impacts

The first step is to make every effort to plan and design your project to avoid causing an impact. If there is an unavoidable impact to critical areas or their buffers, the SMP critical area provisions require that those impacts be mitigated. Mitigation for shoreline development commonly includes reducing the level of impact within a critical area, such as moving a house away from a wetland and buffer or replanting buffer areas to compensate for impacts of new development.

Mitigation should be provided in the following order of priority:

1. **Avoid** the impact altogether by not taking a certain action or parts of an action. If impacts cannot be avoided, they must be mitigated - steps 2 through 6.

2. **Minimize** the impact by limiting the degree or magnitude of the action. An example might be switching from a concrete driveway to a gravel driveway to allow stormwater to infiltrate.
3. **Rectify** the impact by repairing, rehabilitating, or restoring the impacted critical areas to pre-project condition. An example would be regrading or replanting a wetland or stream buffer inside of the development envelope.
4. **Reduce** the impact through ongoing preservation and maintenance operations. An example would be retaining mature trees within the development envelope or avoiding the use of pesticides.
5. **Compensate** for the impact by replacing or enhancing the impacted critical areas. An example would be replanting a wetland or stream buffer outside of the development envelope to off-set lost functions from the placement of a house.
6. **Monitor** the impacts and mitigation, and correct them as needed. An example would be annually checking newly planted buffer areas and replacing plants that have died.


Lower priority measures may only be used where higher priority measures are determined to be infeasible or inapplicable. The SMP also prefers that compensatory mitigation occurs on the same site as the impact and is mitigated "in-kind" (e.g., if a Douglas Fir is removed in a buffer, it will be replaced by a Douglas Fir elsewhere in the buffer).

If your project impacts a critical area, the SMP requires you submit a mitigation plan, which will include a written narrative and site plan showing how you will minimize or mitigate the impact. Restoration and enhancement completed prior to a shoreline development project may be eligible as credit towards future development-related mitigation requirements.



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