



Ohio Department of Natural Resources
Division of Soil and Water Resources
Fact Sheet

Fact Sheet 99-54

Dam Safety: Ground Cover

The establishment and control of proper vegetation are an important part of dam maintenance. Properly maintained vegetation can help prevent erosion of embankment and earth channel surfaces, and aid in the control of groundhogs and muskrats. The uncontrolled growth of vegetation can damage embankments and concrete structures and make close inspection difficult.

Grass vegetation is an effective and inexpensive way to prevent erosion of embankment surfaces. If properly maintained, it also enhances the appearance of the dam and provides a surface that can be easily inspected. Roots and stems tend to trap fine sand and soil particles, forming an erosion-resistant layer once the plants are well established. Grass vegetation may not be effective in areas of concentrated runoff, such as at the contact of the embankment and abutments, or in areas subjected to wave action.

Common Problems

Bare Areas

Bare areas on an embankment are void of protective cover (e.g. grass, asphalt, riprap etc.). They are more susceptible to erosion which can lead to localized stability problems such as small slides and sloughs. Bare areas must be repaired by establishing a proper grass cover or by installing other protective cover. If using grass, the topsoil must be prepared with fertilizer and then scarified before sowing seed. Types of grass vegetation that have been used on dams in Ohio are bluegrass, fescue, ryegrass, alfalfa, clover, and redtop. One suggested seed mixture is 30% Kentucky Bluegrass, 60% Kentucky 31 Fescue, and 10% Perennial Ryegrass. Once the seed is sown, the area should be mulched and watered regularly.

Erosion

Embankment slopes are normally designed and constructed so that the surface drainage will be spread out in a thin layer as “sheet flow” over the grass cover. When the sod is in poor condition or flow is concentrated at one or more locations, the resulting erosion will leave rills and gullies in the embankment slope. The erosion will cause loss of material and make maintenance of the embankment difficult. Prompt repair of the erosion is required to prevent more serious damage to the embankment. If

erosion gullies are extensive, a registered professional engineer may be required to design a more rigid repair such as riprap or concrete. Minor rills and gullies can be repaired by filling them with compacted cohesive material. Topsoil should be a minimum of 4 inches deep. The area should then be seeded and mulched. Not only should the eroded areas be repaired, but the cause of the erosion should be addressed to prevent a continued maintenance problem.

Footpaths

Paths from animal and pedestrian traffic are problems common to many embankments. If a path has become established, vegetation in this area will not provide adequate protection and a more durable cover will be required unless the traffic is eliminated. Gravel, asphalt, and concrete have been used effectively to cover footpaths. Embedding railroad ties or other treated wood beams into an embankment slope to form steps is one of the most successful and inexpensive methods used to provide a protected pathway.

Vehicle Ruts

Vehicle ruts can also be a problem on the embankment. Vehicular traffic on the dam should be discouraged especially during wet conditions except when necessary. Water collected in ruts may cause localized saturation, thereby weakening the embankment. Vehicles can also severely damage the vegetation on embankments. Worn areas could lead to erosion and more serious problems. Ruts that develop in the crest should be repaired by grading to direct all surface drainage into the impoundment. Bare and eroded areas should be repaired using the methods mentioned in the above sections. Constructed barriers such as fences and gates are effective ways to limit access of vehicles.

Improper Vegetation

Crown vetch, a perennial plant with small pink flowers, has been used on some dams in Ohio but is not recommended (see Figure 1). It hides the embankment surface, preventing early detection of cracks and erosion. It is not effective in preventing erosion.

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Figure 1: Crown Vetch
(Source: <http://www.vg.com>)

Vines and woody vegetation such as trees and brush also hide the embankment surface preventing early detection of cracks and erosion. Tall vegetation also provides a habitat for burrowing animals. All improper vegetation must be removed from the entire embankment surface. Any residual roots that are larger than 3 inches in diameter must be removed. All roots should be removed down to a depth of at least 6 inches and replaced with a compacted clay material; then 4 inches of topsoil should be placed on the disturbed areas of the slope. Finally, these areas must be seeded and mulched to establish a proper grass cover.

Maintenance

Embankments, areas adjacent to spillway structures, vegetated channels, and other areas associated with a dam require continual maintenance of the vegetal cover. Removal of improper vegetation is necessary for the proper maintenance of a dam, dike or levee. All embankment slopes and vegetated earth spillways should be mowed at least twice a year. Reasons for proper maintenance of the vegetal cover include unobstructed viewing during inspection, maintenance of a non-erodible surface, discouragement of burrowing animal habitation, and aesthetics.

Common methods for control of vegetation include the use of weed trimmers or power brush-cutters and mowers. Chemical spraying to kill small trees and brush is acceptable if precautions are taken to protect the local environment. Some chemical spraying may require proper training prior to application. Additional information can be found on the Trees and Brush Fact Sheet.

Any other questions, comments concerns, or fact sheet requests, should be directed to:

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