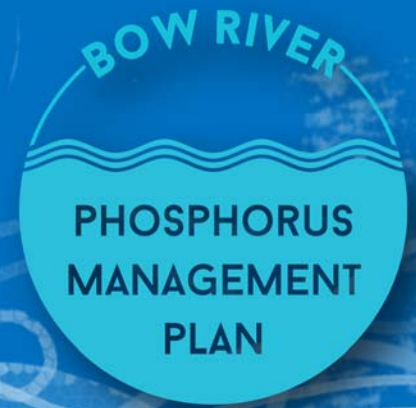


# STEPPING BACK FROM THE WATER

A Beneficial Management Practices Guide For New Development Near Water Bodies In Alberta's Settled Region



## What is a riparian area?

Riparian Area refers to any land that adjoins or directly influences a water body. They are the place where water and land meet and interact, and provide crucial ecosystems services valuable to all Albertans. Typical examples include the green ribbons of lush vegetation that grow on floodplains and watercourse banks.

## Why is a riparian area important?

Healthy riparian areas provide essential ecological functions, including:

- Protecting and enhancing water quality
- Conveying and storing water during floods
- Stabilizing shorelines and riverbanks
- Providing habitat for wildlife and increasing biodiversity
- Adaptation and resiliency to potential changing climate
- Aesthetic, recreational and social benefits



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Maintaining healthy aquatic ecosystems is one of the three goals identified in Alberta's Water for Life strategy, which recognizes that healthy aquatic ecosystems are vital to high quality of life for Albertans.

## What is Stepping Back from the Water?

Stepping Back from the Water was developed to help minimize the impact of new development in Alberta's settled region, providing provincial direction on how to reduce and minimize the impacts and risks of development adjacent to waterbodies by establishing effective setbacks.

## Why is Stepping Back from the Water Important?

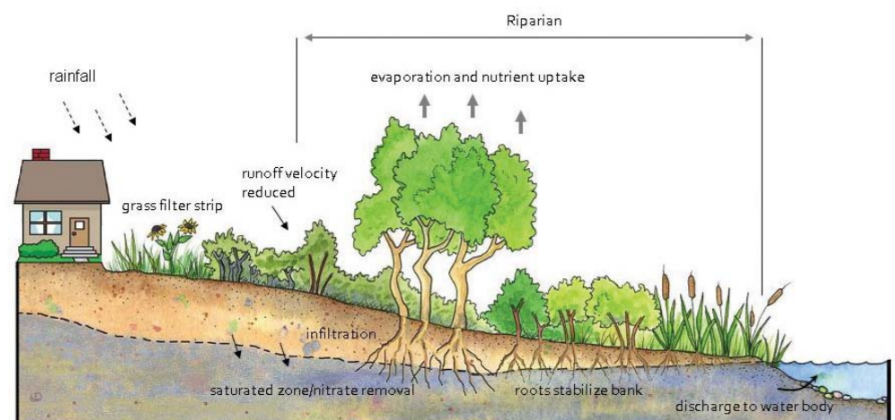
By keeping permanent developments an appropriate distance from the water and maintaining riparian areas in a healthy state, the ecosystem services they provide can be enjoyed for generations to come.

## What is the Purpose of Stepping Back from the Water?

The handbook provides decision makers with information for determining setback widths and designing effective buffers adjacent to water bodies, which are needed to protect aquatic ecosystems from the impacts of development.

Stepping Back attempts to assist in the identification and understand riparian areas, how to apply effective riparian buffers, and supporting users to encourage new policies for achieving environmental outcomes related to riparian areas.

Illustration Showing a Riparian Area and Some of Its Interactions with Water



## What is development/what kind of development is setback in Stepping Back from the Water?

Section 616 of MGA: (paraphrased) development: Construction of a building, excavation or stockpile, or a change in use or intensity of use done in relation to land or a building.

## What is a setback/buffer?

A setback/buffer refers to the minimum distance that must be conserved around a water body to maintain desired ecological processes, while providing economic and societal benefits.

## Why is a setback/buffer around a riparian area important?

Current demands on riparian areas compromise their ability to provide the environmental, aesthetic and economic benefits that attracted settlement around these areas. Without setbacks, development can:

- Increase pollution within surface and groundwater
- Increase the impact to communities during floods
- Decrease bank stability, and increase erosion and sedimentation
- Reduce habitat and biodiversity, and introduce invasive species
- Eliminate existing aesthetic, recreational and social benefits.

## How is a setback/buffer determined?

Setbacks are calculated using site specific information to determine buffers which should maintain the ecosystem services provided by riparian areas, and reduce the risk of negative impacts of development. Site specific information to calculate appropriate setbacks should include:

- Topography and slope of the site
- Parent material within the soil profile
- Groundwater connectivity
- Floodway and flood fringe levels
- Erosion prone lands, sloping and unstable ground
- Environmentally significant areas

## Who is Stepping Back from the Water intended for?

This handbook was designed to assist municipalities, watershed groups, developers and landowners determine appropriate setbacks for development around our lakes, rivers and wetlands, emphasizing the conservation of riparian areas, the lush strips of land adjacent to lakes, rivers, streams and wetlands

## Why a Municipal Audience?

Municipalities play a key role in the management of riparian areas in Alberta. Subdividing authorities have the ability to establish development setbacks, dedicate environmental reserves, municipal reserves and conservation easements, and maintain ecological function through the creation of land-use bylaws.

The handbook is intended to assist local authorities with policy creation, decision making and watershed management relative to structural development near water bodies. The recommendations in the handbook can be used to supplement existing guidelines and achieve desired environmental outcomes.

Find the complete guide at  
[aep.alberta.ca/](http://aep.alberta.ca/)

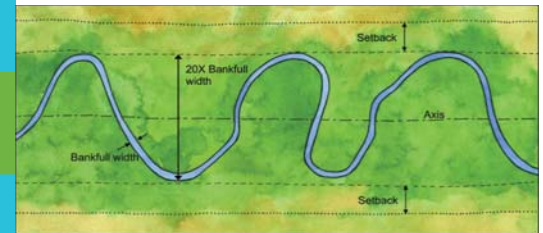
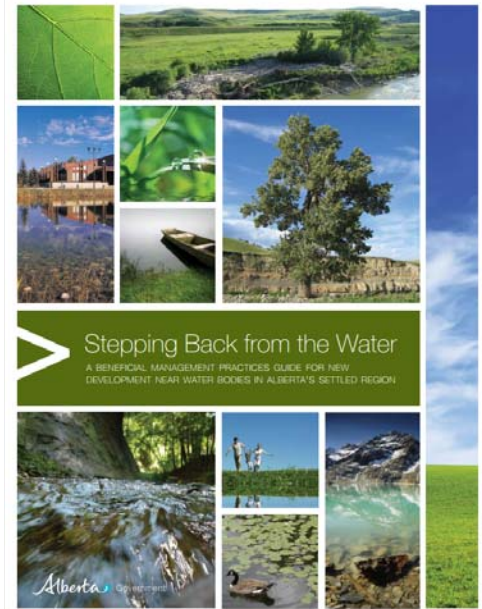


Image: Schematic diagram of meander belt

## What is being planned related to Stepping Back from the

Alberta Environment and Parks, through the Watershed Resiliency and Restoration Program and other partners will continue to develop tools and materials to support Albertans in implementing the recommendations within the handbook, conserving and enhancing the ecosystem services provided by riparian areas throughout the province.

### Additional information

**Bow River Phosphorus Management Plan**  
<http://aep.alberta.ca/>

**Visit the Watershed Resiliency and Restoration Program website at [www.wrrp.alberta.ca](http://www.wrrp.alberta.ca)**

### Contact information

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