

# **Buffers 100: Taking a positive trend statewide**

**A Clean Water Action Report**

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## ***Summary***

Eight million Pennsylvanians get their drinking water from rivers and streams. One of the best ways to protect our communities and streams is to preserve and create naturally vegetated areas along the banks of all streams, creeks, wetlands and rivers in the Commonwealth. This vegetated buffer helps to filter out pollution from runoff and store water to insure against drought and reduce flooding. Buffers also slow erosion by keeping stream banks in place, and protect and nurture the aquatic life native to Pennsylvania.

While any buffer is helpful, research has shown that, below 100 feet wide, the effectiveness of buffers rapidly diminishes. 100 foot buffers have also been shown to improve property values by protecting the quality of waterways that make adjacent properties attractive. They also reduce costs for drinking water treatment and stormwater management.

Clean Water Action surveyed municipalities in more than a dozen counties across Pennsylvania and found riparian buffer ordinances are a growing trend. 30 communities in thirteen Commonwealth counties surveyed have 100-foot buffer ordinances, similar to that promoted in the Campaign for Clean Water's Buffers 100 Campaign. Many more have some sort of riparian buffer requirement for new development.

**Because water does not respect municipal borders, the best way to achieve maximum protection for the state's water resources is to adopt a statewide buffers regulation.**

Such a regulation would ensure that 100 feet of natural vegetation is protected alongside all streams and rivers in the state whenever new development occurs.

## ***Methodology and Findings***

The survey was conducted by searching online municipal codes in counties with large populations of Clean Water Action members or near our offices. In many cases, telephone calls were also made to city and/or county officials. The source of all information was documented.

The survey found 192 municipalities in thirteen counties with some kind of buffer ordinance. The counties surveyed and number of municipalities with riparian protections found in each county are as follows:

<b>County</b>	<b>Number of Municipalities with Buffer Ordinances</b>	<b>Number of Municipalities with 100 Foot Buffers on All or Some Streams</b>
Adams	3	-
Allegheny	21	-
Berks	20	5
Bucks	32	3
Butler	2	-
Chester	41	24
Cumberland	2	1
Dauphin	4	2
Erie	-	-
Lehigh	6	3
Monroe	14	8
Montgomery	26	4
Northampton	15	12
Venango	-	-
Westmoreland	2	1
York	4	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>192</b>	<b>63</b>

Over 30% of the ordinances surveyed required buffers of 100 feet or more on at least some of their streams. Very few were for less than 50 feet. Some municipalities (including many in Lehigh County) require a full buffer on some streams and a partial one on others (usually in the form of a larger buffer for larger waterways). A handful of places used 100 year floodplains (or a similar map) to set the width.

In some places, Clean Water Action could not determine whether or not a riparian zone ordinance existed and its size, usually due to administrative obstacles (such as fees for paper copies of codes). No doubt, many communities in counties that we did not survey also have buffer ordinances.

These findings must only be viewed as a summary. We did not conduct an exhaustive search of every municipality in the state nor were we able to find ordinances and zoning codes for every municipality in the counties surveyed. In some cases, ordinances are fairly complex with exemptions, exceptions or variation between environmental contexts or orders of streams. In most cases, however, the riparian zone ordinances can be easily described and the ordinances are relatively simple.

Anecdotally, there is a higher incidence of buffers ordinances downstream in large watersheds. There is also wider participation in places where the counties have actively promoted the adoption of buffers.

### ***Pennsylvania should require 100 foot buffers on new developments***

Numerous municipalities in the state have already taken action to protect their water resources by adopting ordinances requiring buffers for new development along streams. While this is heartening, statewide regulations requiring buffers are an important next step.

Water does not respect municipal boundaries. A municipality could adopt a strong buffer ordinance but still suffer from pollution and flooding if upstream municipalities fail to adopt a similar ordinance. The only way to maximize protection is for all municipalities to adopt a buffer ordinance, which is unlikely since many municipalities in the state don't even have a zoning ordinance. **The best alternative for maximizing protection of our water resources is a statewide regulation that guarantees minimum 100 foot protection for all streams in the Commonwealth.**

## **Pennsylvania Municipalities with Ordinances Mandating 100 Foot or Greater Stream Buffers on some or all streams**

The municipalities listed below have adopted ordinances mandating stream buffers of 100 feet or greater on at least some streams. This is by no means a comprehensive list, but simply a sample showing some communities in selected Pennsylvania counties who have taken action on this issue.

### **Berks**

Albany Township  
Bern Township  
Colebrookdale Township  
Heidelberg Township  
Womelsdorf Borough

### **Bucks**

Springfield Township  
Morrisville Borough  
Northampton Township

### **Chester County**

Caln Township  
Charlestown Township  
East Bradford Township  
East Brandywine Township  
East Caln Township  
East Coventry Township  
East Nantmeal Township  
Kennett Township  
London Britain Township  
London Grove Township  
New Garden Township  
North Coventry Township  
Sadsbury Township  
Schuylkill Township  
Uwchlan Township  
Wallace Township  
Warwick Township  
West Brandywine Township  
West Goshen Township  
West Nantmeal Township  
West Pikeland Township  
West Whiteland Township  
Willistown Township

### **Cumberland**

Lower Allen Township

### **Dauphin County**

Hummelstown Borough  
West Hanover Township

### **Lehigh County**

Lower Milford Township  
Upper Milford Township  
Washington Township

### **Monroe**

Barrett Township  
Chestnut Hill Township  
East Stroudsburg Borough  
Mount Pocono Borough  
Price Township  
Ross Township  
Smithfield Township  
Stroud Township

### **Montgomery County**

Collegeville Borough  
Norristown  
Perkiomen Township  
Upper Pottsgrove Township

### **Northampton County**

Stockertown Borough  
Tatamy Borough  
Bethlehem Township  
Bushkill Township  
East Allen Township  
Lower Nazareth Township  
Lower Saucon Township  
Palmer Township  
Upper Nazareth Township  
Upper Saucon Township  
Wilson Borough  
Williams Township

### **Westmoreland**

Hempfield Township