

## Description and Purpose

A check dam is a small barrier constructed of rock, gravel bags, sandbags, fiber rolls, or reusable products, placed across a constructed swale or drainage ditch. Check dams reduce the effective slope of the channel, thereby reducing the velocity of flowing water, allowing sediment to settle and reducing erosion.

## Suitable Applications

Check dams may be appropriate in the following situations:

- To promote sedimentation behind the dam.
- To prevent erosion by reducing the velocity of channel flow in small intermittent channels and temporary swales.
- In small open channels that drain 10 acres or less.
- In steep channels where stormwater runoff velocities exceed 5 ft/s.
- During the establishment of grass linings in drainage ditches or channels.
- In temporary ditches where the short length of service does not warrant establishment of erosion-resistant linings.

## Limitations

- Not to be used in live streams or in channels with extended base flows.

## Objectives

EC	Erosion Control	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
SE	Sediment Control	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
TR	Tracking Control	
WE	Wind Erosion Control	
NS	Non-Stormwater Management Control	
WM	Waste Management and Materials Pollution Control	

## Legend:

- ☒ Primary Objective
- ☒ Secondary Objective

## Targeted Constituents

Sediment	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Nutrients	
Trash	
Metals	
Bacteria	
Oil and Grease	
Organics	

## Potential Alternatives

- SE-5 Fiber Rolls
- SE-6 Gravel Bag Berm
- SE-8 Sandbag Barrier



- Not appropriate in channels that drain areas greater than 10 acres.
- Not appropriate in channels that are already grass-lined unless erosion is expected, as installation may damage vegetation.
- Require extensive maintenance following high velocity flows.
- Promotes sediment trapping which can be re-suspended during subsequent storms or removal of the check dam.

## Implementation

### ***General***

Check dams reduce the effective slope and create small pools in swales and ditches that drain 10 acres or less. Reduced slopes reduce the velocity of stormwater flows, thus reducing erosion of the swale or ditch and promoting sedimentation. Use of check dams for sedimentation will likely result in little net removal of sediment because of the small detention time and probable scour during longer storms. Using a series of check dams will generally increase their effectiveness. A sediment trap (SE-3) may be placed immediately upstream of the check dam to increase sediment removal efficiency.

### ***Design and Layout***

Check dams work by decreasing the effective slope in ditches and swales. An important consequence of the reduced slope is a reduction in capacity of the ditch or swale. This reduction in capacity must be considered when using this BMP, as reduced capacity can result in overtopping of the ditch or swale and resultant consequences. In some cases, such as a “permanent” ditch or swale being constructed early and used as a “temporary” conveyance for construction flows, the ditch or swale may have sufficient capacity such that the temporary reduction in capacity due to check dams is acceptable. When check dams reduce capacities beyond acceptable limits, there are several options:

- Don’t use check dams. Consider alternative BMPs.
- Increase the size of the ditch or swale to restore capacity.

Maximum slope and velocity reduction is achieved when the toe of the upstream dam is at the same elevation as the top of the downstream dam. The center section of the dam should be lower than the edge sections so that the check dam will direct flows to the center of the ditch or swale.

Check dams are usually constructed of rock, gravel bags, sandbags, and fiber rolls. A number of products manufactured specifically for use as check dams are also being used, and some of these products can be removed and reused. Check dams can also be constructed of logs or lumber, and have the advantage of a longer lifespan when compared to gravel bags, sandbags, and fiber rolls. Straw bales can also be used for check dams and can work if correctly installed; but in practice, straw bale check dams have a high failure rate. Check dams should not be constructed from straw bales or silt fences, since concentrated flows quickly wash out these materials.

Rock check dams are usually constructed of 8 to 12 in. rock. The rock is placed either by hand or mechanically, but never just dumped into the channel. The dam must completely span the ditch

or swale to prevent washout. The rock used must be large enough to stay in place given the expected design flow through the channel.

Log check dams are usually constructed of 4 to 6 in. diameter logs. The logs should be embedded into the soil at least 18 in. Logs can be bolted or wired to vertical support logs that have been driven or buried into the soil.

Gravel bag and sandbag check dams are constructed by stacking bags across the ditch or swale, shaped as shown in the drawings at the end of this fact sheet.

Manufactured products should be installed in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions.

If grass is planted to stabilize the ditch or swale, the check dam should be removed when the grass has matured (unless the slope of the swales is greater than 4%).

The following guidance should be followed for the design and layout of check dams:

- Install the first check dam approximately 16 ft from the outfall device and at regular intervals based on slope gradient and soil type.
- Check dams should be placed at a distance and height to allow small pools to form between each check dam.
- Backwater from a downstream check dam should reach the toes of the upstream check dam.
- A sediment trap provided immediately upstream of the check dam will help capture sediment. Due to the potential for this sediment to be resuspended in subsequent storms, the sediment trap must be cleaned following each storm event.
- High flows (typically a 2-year storm or larger) should safely flow over the check dam without an increase in upstream flooding or damage to the check dam.
- Where grass is used to line ditches, check dams should be removed when grass has matured sufficiently to protect the ditch or swale.
- Gravel bags may be used as check dams with the following specifications:

## ***Materials***

Gravel bags used for check dams should conform to the requirements of SE-6, Gravel Bag Berms. Sandbags used for check dams should conform to SE-8, Sandbag Barrier. Fiber rolls used for check dams should conform to SE-5, Fiber Rolls. Straw bales used for check dams should conform to SE-9, Straw Bale Barrier.

## ***Installation***

- Rock should be placed individually by hand or by mechanical methods (no dumping of rock) to achieve complete ditch or swale coverage.
- Tightly abut bags and stack according to detail shown in the figure at the end of this section. Gravel bags and sandbags should not be stacked any higher than 3 ft.
- Fiber rolls and straw bales must be trenched in and firmly staked in place.

**Costs**

Cost consists of only installation costs if materials are readily available. If material must be imported, costs may increase. For material costs, see SE-5, SE-6, SE-8 and SE-9.

**Inspection and Maintenance**

- Inspect BMPs prior to forecast rain, daily during extended rain events, after rain events, weekly during the rainy season, and at two-week intervals during the non-rainy season.
- Replace missing rock, bags, bales, etc. Replace bags or bales that have degraded or have become damaged.
- If the check dam is used as a sediment capture device, sediment that accumulates in the BMP must be periodically removed in order to maintain BMP effectiveness. Sediment should be removed when the sediment accumulation reaches one-third of the barrier height. Sediment removed during maintenance may be incorporated into earthwork on the site or disposed at an appropriate location.
- If the check dam is used as a grade control structure, sediment removal is not required as long as the system continues to control the grade.
- Remove accumulated sediment prior to permanent seeding or soil stabilization.
- Remove check dam and accumulated sediment when check dams are no longer needed.

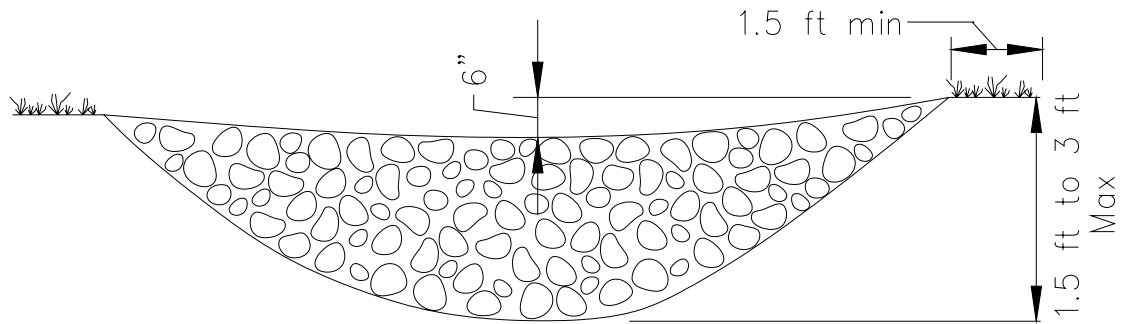
**References**

Draft – Sedimentation and Erosion Control, and Inventory of Current Practices, USEPA, April 1990.

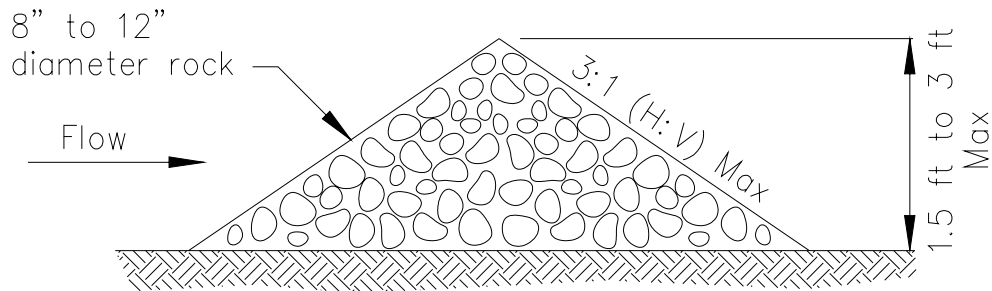
Manual of Standards of Erosion and Sediment Control Measures, Association of Bay Area Governments, May 1995.

Stormwater Quality Handbooks - Construction Site Best Management Practices (BMPs) Manual, State of California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), November 2000.

Stormwater Management of the Puget Sound Basin, Technical Manual, Publication #91-75, Washington State Department of Ecology, February 1992.

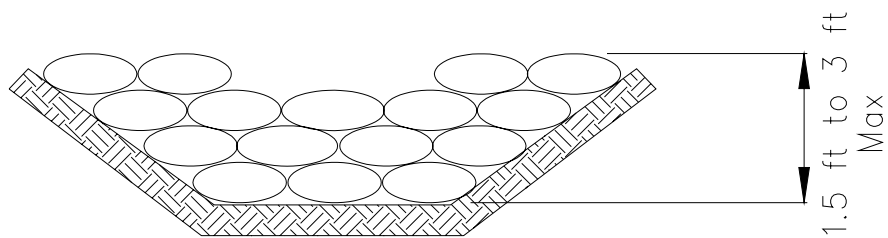


ELEVATION



TYPICAL ROCK CHECK DAM SECTION

ROCK CHECK DAM  
NOT TO SCALE



GRAVEL BAG CHECK DAM ELEVATION  
NOT TO SCALE