

**NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE**  
**CONSERVATION PRACTICE STANDARD**  
**SEASONAL HIGH TUNNEL SYSTEM FOR CROPS**

(Ft<sup>2</sup>)

**CODE 798**

**DEFINITION**

A seasonal polyethylene covered structure that is used to cover crops to extend the growing season in an environmentally safe manner.

**PURPOSES**

- Improve plant quality
- Improve soil quality
- Reduced nutrient and pesticide transport
- Improve air quality through reduced transportation inputs
- Reduce energy use through local consumption

**CONDITIONS WHERE PRACTICE APPLIES**

Use of this standard will comply with all applicable federal, state, and local laws and regulations.

This practice applies to cropland where extension of the growing season is needed due to climate conditions and crops can be grown in the natural soil profile.

Permanently raised beds may be installed to improve soil condition, fertility, and agri-ability access, but does not apply to crops not grown in the natural soil profile (i.e. tables/benches, portable pots, etc.).

This practice does not include greenhouses or low tunnel systems that may cover single crop rows.

**CRITERIA**

**General Criteria Applicable to All Purposes**

Plan supportive conservation practices to address all environmental concerns associated with the use of tunnel systems.

The seasonal tunnel structure must be planned, designed, and constructed in accordance with manufacturer's recommendation. The tunnel frame must be constructed of metal, wood, or durable plastic, and be at least 6 feet in height.

Seasonal tunnel structures will be selected and applied over the crop area. The material will be of a significant thickness to withstand the temperature modification for the period required. As a minimum, a 6-mil greenhouse-grade, UV resistant polyethylene cover will be used.

In climate conditions where snow loads may damage the structure, the tunnel cover will be removed or rolled up at the end of the growing season unless the structure is designed to withstand expected snow loads.

Runoff will be directed away from the tunnel structure to avoid ponding. The minimum design capacity for runoff structures will be a 10-year storm frequency, 5-minute rainfall precipitation event. Runoff may empty into surface or underground outlets, or onto the ground surface when properly protected. Surface and underground outlets will be sized to ensure adequate capacity. Provide for cleanout as appropriate. When runoff from tunnel covers empties onto the ground surface, a detention basin, storage reservoir,

**Conservation practice standards are reviewed periodically, and updated if needed. To obtain the current version of this standard, contact the Natural Resources Conservation Service State Office, or download it from the Field Office Technical Guide for your State.**

or stable outlet will be provided. Runoff may be captured and used for irrigation purposes.

Surface or ground outlets such as rock pads, rock filled trenches with subsurface drains, concrete and other erosion-resistant pads, or preformed channels may be used.

Seeding and vegetation will be established on all disturbed earth surfaces. Refer to Indiana (IN) Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG) Standard (342) Critical Area Planting.

#### **Additional Criteria to Reduce Nutrient and Pesticide Transport**

The irrigation water applied under the covered area will not exceed the available water capacity of the soil to avoid runoff and leaching below the root zone.

#### **Additional Criteria to Improve Soil Quality**

The area inside the seasonal structure will have soil loss within the soil tolerance level (T) using currently approved agency wind and water erosion technology.

Apply nutrients, manure, compost or organic-by-products under favorable soil conditions to minimize compaction.

Use high residue planting systems, cover crops and crop rotations to maintain and/or improve soil health.

#### **Additional Criteria to Improve Air Quality and Reduce Energy Consumption**

The crops produced for sale and consumption will be within commuting distances of farmers markets, fruit/produce distribution centers, or other community facilities.

### **CONSIDERATIONS**

Locate the tunnel cover convenient for ingress/egress of plant materials.

Place tunnels in sites with adequate drainage in full sun and if possible, with protection from the wind. A north-south orientation will usually optimize sun exposure.

Remove or manipulate side covers to control internal temperatures.

Rotate the location of the tunnel to allow rain, wind, sun, and cold temperatures to cleanse the soil from disease build up. Plan

rotations with growing cover crops during the uncovered period.

Plan the appropriate measures to address:

- crop rotation
- irrigation water management
- nutrient management
- pest management
- runoff from the structure

Have a reliable source of good quality water near or in the tunnel.

### **PLANS AND SPECIFICATIONS**

Plans and specifications will be prepared in accordance with the criteria of this standard. As a minimum, the plans and specifications will provide the following:

- Layout and location of the tunnel cover; erosion control, runoff, and vegetative cover practices.
- Materials list and structural details of the cover including all necessary appurtenances as appropriate for the complete system.
- Procedure and timing for installing the tunnel cover (construction sequence), erosion control, runoff, and vegetative practices.
- Procedure and timing to remove or roll up the tunnel cover prior to inclement weather conditions.
- Site preparation.

### **OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE**

An operation and maintenance (O&M) plan must be prepared and reviewed with the landowner or operator responsible for the application of the practice. The O&M plan will provide specific instruction for proper operation and maintenance of each component of this practice and will detail the level of repairs needed to maintain the effectiveness and useful life of the practice.

Covered area will be periodically inspected, and will be reinstalled or repaired as needed to accomplish the intended purpose.

Removal of cover materials will be consistent with the intended purpose and site conditions.

Operation of equipment near and on the site will not compromise the intended purpose of the cover.

## REFERENCES

Community Garden Guide Season  
Extension - High Tunnel, NRCS <http://plant-materials.nrcs.usda.gov/mipmc>

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University College of Agriculture,  
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