

**Waste classification
guidelines
Part 4: Acid sulfate soils**



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Classifying wastes into groups that pose similar risks to the environment and human health facilitates their management and appropriate disposal. It is the responsibility of those who generate waste to classify that waste. To assist waste generators classify the wastes they produce, the EPA has developed the *Waste Classification Guidelines* ('the Guidelines') which are a step-by-step process for classifying waste.

Generators and waste facilities must carefully follow the procedures in these Guidelines to ensure they comply with applicable laws in classifying their waste and safeguard protection of the environment and human health.

The Guidelines are comprised of the following sections, of which this document is Part 4:

Overview of the Guidelines

Part 1: Classifying waste

Part 2: Immobilisation of waste

Part 3: Waste containing radioactive material

Part 4: Acid sulfate soils

All sections of the Guidelines are available for download from the EPA website at www.epa.nsw.gov.au/waste/classification.htm.

Introduction

Acid sulfate soils (ASS) are those naturally occurring sediments and soils which contain sulfides, mainly iron sulfide and iron disulfide or their precursors. Exposure of these sulfides in the soil to oxygen – often as a result of drainage or excavation – can produce sulfuric acid, which may have a significant impact on the environment. Leaching of sulfuric acid into waterways can cause serious water quality problems, resulting in fish kills and damage to infrastructure, such as floodgates and bridges.

ASS are most commonly found in NSW along the coast and they need to be managed appropriately to avoid major environmental damage.

The NSW *Acid Sulfate Soils Manual*¹ (the ASS Manual) provides ‘best practice’ guidance for planning, assessing and managing activities in areas prone to developing ASS. The manual is available from the NSW Department of Planning: phone 1300 305 695.

Using this part of the Guidelines

This part of the EPA Waste Classification Guidelines (the Guidelines) applies to acid sulfate soils which are unable to be managed on-site. In these cases, off-site disposal to landfill is often the most appropriate management option.

Waste generators need to assess the status of ASS at their point of generation, using the techniques outlined in the ASS Manual. The ASS Manual also provides guidance for on-site management, while this part of the Waste Classification Guidelines details disposal requirements for ASS that need to be transported and managed off-site.

This document has advice on dealing with both ‘potential’ ASS and ‘actual’ ASS. The two types are often found together in the same soil profile, with actual ASS generally overlying potential ASS horizons.

Potential acid sulfate soils

Potential ASS are soils that contain iron sulfides or sulfidic materials that have not been exposed to air and thus are not oxidised. The pH of these soils in their undisturbed state is 5.5 or more, making them neutral or slightly alkaline. If not managed appropriately, potential ASS pose a considerable environmental risk: disturbance and exposure to air may render them severely acidic.

Handling potential acid sulfate soils prior to disposal

Potential ASS must be kept wet at all times during excavation and subsequent handling, transport and storage, until they can be disposed of safely. They must be received at the proposed disposal point within 16 hours of being dug up.

¹ Stone Y, Ahem, CR and Blunden, B 1998. *Acid Sulphate Soils Manual 1998*. Acid Sulphate Soils Management Advisory Committee (ASSMAC), Wollongbar, NSW.

Disposal of potential acid sulfate soils *below* the water table

Potential ASS may be disposed of in water below the permanent water table, provided:

- this occurs before they have had a chance to oxidise, i.e. within 24 hours of excavation and
- they meet the definition of ‘virgin excavated natural material’ (VENM) under the *Protection of the Environment Operations Act 1997*, even though they contain sulfidic ores or soils.

Landfills must be licensed by the EPA to dispose of potential ASS below the water table. EPA’s Environment Line has details on facilities able to accept this waste: phone 131 555.

Potential ASS must be disposed of within 8 hours of their receipt at a landfill and kept wet at all times until their burial at least two metres below the lowest historical level of the water table at the disposal site.

Documentation must be provided to the occupier of the landfill for each truckload of potential ASS received, indicating that the soil’s excavation, transport and handling have been in accordance with the ASS Manual, thus preventing the generation of acid.

The occupier of the disposal site must also test the pH of each load of soil received immediately prior to its placement under water using the test method(s) in the ASS Manual (Methods 21A and/or 21Af). These details, together with the pH of the soil recorded at the time of its extraction, must be retained by the occupier of the landfill site.

The disposal site’s licence will outline what documentation needs to be kept and for how long.

Soil that has dried out, undergone any oxidation of its sulfidic minerals, or which has a pH of less than 5.5 must be treated by neutralisation and disposed of at a landfill that can lawfully accept it (see **Disposal of actual acid sulfate soils** below).

The pH of the water at the landfill into which the potential ASS is placed must not be less than 6.0 at any time. Landfill licence conditions require the occupiers of potential ASS disposal sites to regularly monitor the pH of ground and surface waters at their premises.

Disposal of potential acid sulfate soils *above* the water table

Where potential ASS cannot be classified as VENM or a suitable underwater disposal site at a landfill is not available, the soil must be treated in accordance with the neutralising techniques in the ASS Manual. After treatment the soil should be chemically assessed in accordance with Step 5 in Part 1 of the Waste Classification Guidelines, available at www.epa.nsw.gov.au/waste/classification.htm. This will determine whether any other contaminants are present in the material. When the classification has been established, the soil should be disposed of to a landfill that can lawfully accept that class of waste.

Actual acid sulfate soils

Actual ASS contain highly acidic soil horizons or layers resulting from the aeration of soil materials that are rich in sulfides, primarily iron sulfide. This oxidation produces more hydrogen ions than the sediment is able to neutralise, resulting in soils with a pH of 5.5 or less when measured in dry season conditions. These soils can usually be identified by the presence of pale yellow mottles and coatings of jarosite.

Treatment of actual acid sulfate soils prior to disposal

Actual ASS must be treated by the generator of the waste before they can be considered for disposal. Treatment should be in accordance with the neutralising techniques outlined in the ASS Manual.

Disposal of actual acid sulfate soils

Following neutralisation, the generator of the waste must chemically assess the soil in accordance with Step 5 of Part 1 of the Waste Classification Guidelines. This will determine whether there are any other contaminants that may affect how the waste is classified for disposal.

Once classified, the waste must be taken to a landfill licensed to accept that class of waste.

Prior arrangements should be made with the occupier of the landfill to ensure that it is licensed to accept the waste. The landfill should be informed that the actual ASS has been treated in accordance with the neutralising techniques outlined in the ASS Manual and that the waste has also been classified in accordance with Part 1 of the Waste Classification Guidelines.