



COUNTY OF MENDOCINO
DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING AND BUILDING SERVICES

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Building Policy 01. Grading & Soils

Previous Policies

This consolidated policy replaces and supersedes the following prior bulletins and memoranda:

- Building Bulletin 01: Certification of Engineered Grading, March 25, 1992
- Building Bulletin 14: When Is a Soils Investigation Required, Approximately 2009
- Building Memo 03: Grading in an Isolated Self-Contained Location, December 28, 2020

Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to establish clear, consistent requirements governing:

- Engineered grading and certification
- Soils investigations and geotechnical reporting
- Compaction and bearing capacity verification
- Grading permit exemptions in isolated, self-contained locations

This policy ensures grading and soil-related construction activities are conducted in a manner that protects public safety, structural integrity, environmental stability, and long-term land performance.

Definitions

For the purposes of this policy:

- **Engineered Grading:** Grading activities designed and supervised by a licensed engineer in accordance with approved grading plans.
- **Soils Investigation / Soils Report:** A geotechnical evaluation conducted by a qualified licensed professional in accordance with Chapter 18 of the California Building Code.
- **Compaction Report:** A report verifying soil compaction meets engineering and code requirements.
- **Isolated Self-Contained Location:** A grading area determined by the Building Official to pose no danger to public or private property.
- **Design Professional:** A California-licensed civil, structural, or geotechnical engineer, or architect acting within their scope of practice.

Objectives

The objectives of this policy are to:

1. Ensure grading activities comply with engineered design and code requirements.
2. Protect structures from soil instability, settlement, and failure.
3. Provide consistent criteria for when soils investigations are required.
4. Establish standardized documentation and certification procedures.
5. Allow limited exemptions where grading presents no risk to public or private property.

Authority

The authority for this policy is contained in, but not limited to:

- Mendocino County Code (MCC) Chapter 18.70
- California Building Code (CBC), Chapters 17A and 18
- California Building Code Appendix J

Policy

1. Certification of Engineered Grading

When engineered grading is performed, the responsible engineer shall supervise the grading and, upon completion, submit a statement of compliance to the Department certifying that the grading was completed substantially in conformance with the approved grading plans.

1.1 Compaction Reports and Foundation Inspections

When a grading permit is issued at the same time as a building permit:

- No inspection or approval shall be given for foundation work until a required compaction report has been furnished to the Department.
- The building permit shall not be finalized until the statement of compliance for grading has been received and accepted by the Department.

2. Soils Investigation – General Requirements

The Building Official may require a soils investigation for any project, based on site conditions, mapped information, or professional judgment.

2.1 Existing Soils Reports

If a soils report has been previously performed for a parcel:

- The report shall be included with the application.
- If the report is more than two (2) years old, a soils report review letter from a qualified licensed professional is required.
- All recommendations of the original report and review letter shall be followed.

3. When a Soils Investigation Is Required

3.1 Non-Residential and Non-R-3/U Occupancies

For new or replacement construction other than Occupancy Group R-3 or U (including Groups A, B, E, F, H, I, M, R-1, R-2, and S):

- A soils investigation is REQUIRED.

Exceptions:

- Trash enclosures
- U occupancy storage buildings
- Other accessory structures not occupied by human beings

3.2 Single-Family Dwellings, ADUs, and Guest Houses

For new or replacement single-family dwellings, ADUs, or guest houses, a soils investigation is REQUIRED when any of the following conditions exist, as determined by site review or mapped information:

- Suspected slides, slumps, or soil creep
- Previous fill placement
- Suspected expansive soils
- Insufficient slope setback
- Soft, compressible, or organic soils with low bearing capacity
- Insufficient recommended setback from streams

- High moisture content in soils
- Areas subject to high erosion
- Soft soils due to past deep ripping or cultivation below minimum foundation depth
- Structures that are not light wood frame construction
- Evidence of structural failure of an existing foundation due to soil conditions
- Seismic Hazard Zone – liquefaction or fault zone
- Bluff top Parcels
- Deep Foundations – depth to width ration of 4 to 1 and greater
- Basement / retaining / foundation walls with more than 6 feet of backfill

4. Replacement Structures and Disturbed Soils

When a new replacement structure is proposed:

- Within the footprint of a previous foundation, or
- Where soil has been excavated or disturbed during foundation removal, debris removal, or demolition activities

The following will be required to be submitted at the time of application or plan submittal:

- A compaction test report from a California-licensed civil, structural, or geotechnical engineer, and
- A letter of approval from a California-licensed civil, structural, or geotechnical engineer verifying a minimum soil bearing capacity of 1,500 pounds per square foot, unless otherwise justified by engineering

5. Grading in an Isolated Self-Contained Location (Permit Exemption)

A grading permit may be exempt, when approved by the Building Official, for grading in an isolated, self-contained area where there is no danger to private or public property.

5.1 Exemption Determination Procedure

To determine whether a grading exemption applies:

1. The property owner or agent shall submit:
 - A detailed site plan
 - A USGS map
 - A written description of the grading, including quantity of grading
2. The property owner or agent shall pay for a special inspection, unless the Building Inspector can determine without a site visit that the exemption applies.
3. The Building Inspector shall conduct a site view inspection and determine whether the grading is exempt from a permit.
4. A determination letter shall be issued to the owner/applicant.
5. The site plan, USGS map, grading description, and determination letter shall be uploaded to the associated record.

This policy is effective as of the date of the signatures below.

Policy Approved: 
Richard Angley, Chief Building Official

Date: 03-08-2026

Policy Approved: 
Julia Krog, Director

Date: 03-10-2026