

Looking At My Riparian Area

Do I Have a Problem?

Often, a riparian area will change so slowly and over such a prolonged period of time, that we may not notice what has happened to it. Here are some obvious signs to watch for that may indicate management problems in your riparian areas:



- declining forage production
- change in plant species to drier, upland forms



- willows have mushroom appearance
- trees and shrubs hedged, severely browsed
- all trees and tall shrubs are old
- no young woody plants
- no trees or shrubs



- reduction in bank or shoreline vegetation
- many bare soil spots
- increased sediment on stream bottom



- undesirable or noxious weed invasion
- poor plant vigour, little or no litter carryover, few desirable forage plants



- streambank shear damage by hoof action
- active bank erosion from exposed soils
- bank caving



- water quality problems, algae blooms
- changes in water quantity, lower water tables, intermittent flow

If you have a significant number of these signs in your riparian areas you might think about some management changes.



Where Do I Begin to Improve My Riparian Management?

You have already started by gaining an understanding of what riparian areas are and why they are valuable. Knowing how riparian areas work is key to managing them and to recognizing what might need fixing.

How do things look today?

You might find it useful to “tune your eye” with a riparian health evaluation. This will give you a sense of the current condition, or health, of your riparian area. Combine these measurements with a similar range health evaluation for your upland pastures, to get a feel for the overall condition of your farm or ranch.

Where should my efforts be focused?

Use aerial photographs or some other map base to highlight areas that are “healthy”, “healthy but with problems” and “unhealthy”. Identify those riparian areas that have the highest priority for improvement. Set management objectives that address soil, water and vegetation needs in both riparian areas and uplands. These objectives should be realistic, attainable and measurable.

What are my options for management change?

This booklet provides some practical examples and some additional sources to explore. Cows and Fish, many agencies and other livestock producers may be able to suggest ideas or share experiences to help you find the right option for your operation.

How do I know if it's working?

Successful management doesn't come from a cookbook. Improvement comes from involvement and learning by doing. Imagination, flexibility, observation, patience, trial and sometimes error are required. Monitoring progress with riparian health evaluations and photographs will help you see changes over time.

Creek Field Health Assessment
July 2003

- bare soil; lots of weeds
- lots of browsing on shrubs
- poor forage production

Creek Field Goals

- reduce soil erosion
- monitor willows
- increase forage

Creek Field To Do List

- shorten grazing period
- provide more rest
- develop upland water
- avoid fall & winter use

Creek Field Year 3 Results

- no bare soil
- very few weeds
- new willows
- twice as much forage

