

# Introduction



*This is the same riparian area, separated by a fence and a world of different management.*

The overgrazed side represents a failure to treat riparian areas with care and thought. There are many reasons for this failure:

- ◆ past grazing management concentrated on upland areas, to determine levels of sustainable use and fix problems;
- ◆ it is easy to overlook riparian areas because of their relatively small size;
- ◆ riparian areas can seem to be hard to manage due to their small size and irregular configuration;
- ◆ even in drought and in an overgrazed situation they still appear green and lush, disguising problems; and
- ◆ without insight into their productive nature and how livestock are attracted to them, riparian areas can lose their value.



*Riparian areas are too important, too productive and too valuable to go unrecognized and unmanaged.*



## Why Has the Use of Riparian Areas Become a Concern?

While there is no simple answer to this, we have to acknowledge there are more of us now than there have ever been and cumulatively we have a greater influence on riparian areas. It is also clear that the two to five percent of our rangelands and pastures, which are riparian areas, are disproportionately more important than their size would indicate. Nearly forty years of research by range managers, biologists and hydrologists has shown us the value of riparian areas for forage production, maintenance of fish and wildlife populations and providing water to sustain human communities. There is growing awareness of these values by livestock producers too. The key messages are: riparian areas have significant importance; they are different from uplands; and they need to be managed differently. Research results show us the difficulty of restoring the health and values of these areas, after years of inattention and damage. By comparison, careful, thoughtful management has been shown to maintain riparian areas and all their health and values.

## What are the Benefits of Dealing with Riparian Management Now?

Ignoring or avoiding the problems won't serve us well in the long run and the problems will only get worse. Advice from other areas tells us the future of livestock grazing in riparian areas could well be determined by what changes are made now to maintain or restore those landscapes. Today, in Alberta, one of the forces of change to consider is society's growing awareness of the value and vulnerability of riparian areas. There are many good reasons for beginning to address riparian area management problems now:

- ◆ Healthy, productive riparian areas represent an opportunity to sustain your operation and maybe make more money, since abundant water, shelter and forage translate into cash.
- ◆ Well-managed riparian areas buffer the destructive impacts of floods and droughts, especially when your efforts are combined with those of your neighbours, on a watershed basis.
- ◆ Maintenance of productive riparian areas displays good stewardship of shared resources like water, fish and wildlife. Maintaining those products of riparian areas creates friends and allies for your agricultural operation.
- ◆ Voluntary efforts, to include riparian management in overall farm or ranch operations, may help temper legislation or regulation and may contribute to future incentives.
- ◆ A healthy, productive riparian area can be a powerful tool for you to persuade decision makers and the public that grazing is managed and is compatible with these riparian zones. That compatibility can't be shown only on selected ranches and farms. The practices need to be universally accepted and demonstrated.



## Where to From Here?

As managers and livestock operators, the choice is ours. There are many examples in Alberta and from other areas where working together co-operatively with neighbours and resource managers has resulted in positive change and benefits. None of us are as smart as all of us are; tackling riparian management will require co-operation and maybe some outside help.

***Riparian Areas and Grazing Management*** isn't a cookbook. It doesn't contain all the recipes for successful riparian management. Streams, rivers, wetlands and lakes are different, as are the landscapes they are part of and the farm and ranch operations that exist on them. Each has unique qualities and together are so variable that solutions need to be tailored to each situation.

***Riparian Areas and Grazing Management*** is a guide book, on how to get started and directions on where your travels may take you. It is meant to be used with other Cows and Fish materials. Use it to ease your journey and to discover interesting tid-bits along the way.