

Alarming Issues

A Wake-up Call for Riparian Areas

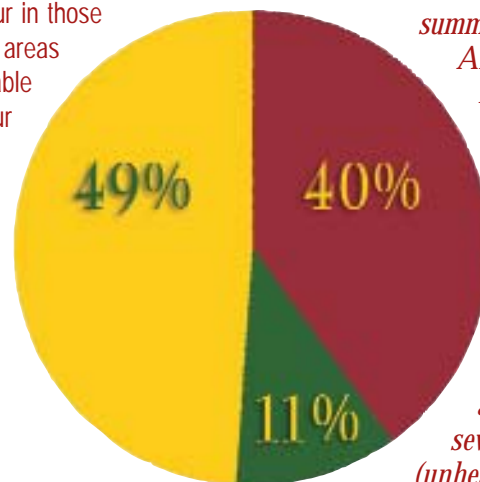


A mid-1940s view of a stream in the foothills of southwestern Alberta shows extensive willow growth in the riparian area, stable banks and a narrow channel with a willow canopy.

Fifty years later there are a few remnant willows and a wider channel with unstable streambanks.



We may tend to think of the products of riparian areas as forage for livestock and wildlife, shelter for livestock and ourselves and fish for angling, but the key element is water. Concerns about water will focus attention on the watersheds that produce this vital resource and on the uses that occur in those watersheds. Intact watersheds with healthy riparian areas will provide downstream water users with acceptable water quality. Those downstream users, including our urban neighbours, might also think about where their water comes from and how to help those that manage the watershed.



We face real issues based on a summary of riparian health for Alberta. Measurements of riparian health help us understand the proportion of reaches where all ecological functions are being performed (healthy), those with stress and some impairment (healthy, with problems) and the ones that are severely damaged (unhealthy). About 11% of Alberta's riparian areas are healthy, 49% are healthy, with problems and 40% are unhealthy.