Wetlands are not Wastelands

Cows and Fish

Wetlands are essentially lands that are wet. They are low lying areas where enough water collects to support water-loving plants, like cattail, rushes, sedges and willow. Wetlands also have perpetually wet soils because they are either saturated with water year-round or covered with water at least some time during the growing season of most years. Sloughs, ponds, potholes, bogs and muskeg areas are all types of wetlands. Wetlands include the area covered by water and the adjacent area of lush water-loving plants called the **riparian area**.

Wetlands vary in shape, size and permanence. A **temporary wetland** may have water only after snowmelt or a heavy rain. Whereas a **semi-permanent wetland** will hold water through most years, but may dry out after several years of drought. And a **permanent wetland** will have water present year round.

Wetlands are not wastelands. They are the connection in the watershed we often cannot see, linking groundwater, surface water in other wetlands, lakes and streams, soil moisture and weather patterns. Wetlands are so closely linked with other parts of the water cycle that drainage can have significant local effects such as lowering the water table, reducing local precipitation and creating greater temperature extremes.

There are many benefits to leaving wetlands and their surrounding riparian areas intact. Some are subtle, such as increased local soil moisture, reduced flooding, more stable stream flow, improved crop production and better water quality. Other benefits are more obvious such as supplying shelter, forage and water for livestock, habitat for wildlife and fish.

In drought some wetlands completely dry up, sometimes for several years in a row. However, even a dry wetland provides many of the same benefits listed above. Seeding a seasonal wetland while it is dry is a risky venture. There is increased danger of frost in the low area and a very high likelihood of flooding once wetter conditions return. Wetland substrates are usually quite impervious, and may be saline, which results in low crop productivity. Several studies have shown that the costs of draining and cropping wetlands are often higher than the crop returns.

What can you do to manage your wetlands on your farm or ranch? Consider leaving your wetlands intact including the natural extent of the riparian vegetation and an additional buffer of extra vegetation where possible. Not only will this trap more snow in winter, increasing soil moisture and recharging groundwater supplies, but this buffer will also filter out nutrients found in runoff from your pastures or cropped fields, improving water quality in your watershed. Manage grazing in wetlands to prevent over-use and trampling by livestock, and to avoid manure build-up.

Cows and Fish helps landowners and their communities to assess their wetlands and other riparian areas as well as develop management strategies to help conserve these valuable resources. For more information on wetlands contact Cows and Fish at 403-381-5538 or view their website at www.cowsandfish.org.