Looking at my Lakeshore and Wetland

riparian health checklist

Cows and Fish Fact Sheet

Riparian Areas

Riparian areas are moist areas of water-loving plants that border a lake, wetland, stream or river. They are very important ecologically, socially and economically. A healthy riparian area helps to reduce bank and shoreline erosion, trap sediments, filter pollutants, improve water quality and provide forage and fish and wildlife habitat. Riparian areas can be part of your property, around a wetland, part of the shoreline, and within environmental and municipal reserves.

How do you know if your riparian area is healthy? Take a look at the photos at the right. Does your riparian area look like one of these or does it lie somewhere in between? To better assess the health of the riparian area on your lake or wetland, fill in the checklist below:



Which best resembles your riparian area? A or B or somewhere in between?





Lakeshore and Wetland Riparian Health CHECKLIST

Answer the following 10 questions to find out how healthy the riparian area of your wetland or lakeshore is. If you are unsure about an answer, leave it blank. Answer True or False.

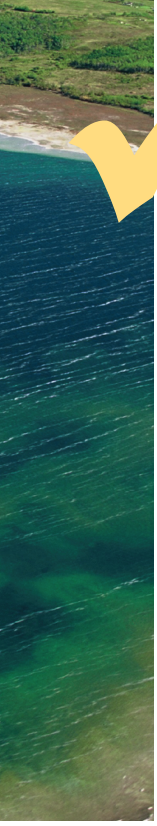






1. 95% or more of the riparian area is covered with vegetation (of any kind). True ☐ False ☐
2. Noxious weeds make up less than 1% of the cover of plants growing in the riparian area (e.g. Canada thistle, ox-eye daisy, leafy spurge, tall buttercup). True ☐ False ☐
3. Disturbance-caused plants such as Kentucky bluegrass (lawn grass), smooth brome, clover, and dandelion make up less than 5% of the cover of all plants growing in the riparian area. Native plants dominate the riparian area. True ☐ False ☐
4. Native trees and shrubs such as poplars, willows, red-osier dogwood, and/or saskatoon are growing in the riparian area AND there are many seedlings and saplings (young plants) present to replace the older ones over time. True ☐ False ☐
5. Native trees and shrubs growing in the riparian area are NOT heavily browsed. (Note: plants that are heavily browsed may have a flat-topped and/or hedged or a mushroom-shaped appearance.) True ☐ False ☐





Lakeshore and Wetland Riparian Health CHECKLIST





6 Native trees and shrubs have NOT been cut down by people or beavers. (Answer "True" if less than 5% of trees and shrubs have been cut.) True ☐ False ☐



7 Riparian area (bank and shore) remains intact and has **NOT** been tilled or physically altered by recreation, machinery, or livestock. Sand, gravel, rock, or concrete has not been imported into the riparian area. True ☐ False ☐



8 The plant community (structure and complexity) is not changed from what is natural for the site. The riparian vegetation is intact and has **NOT** been repeatedly mowed, cleared, heavily grazed, or removed by herbicide application. True ☐ False ☐

9 There is less than 5% human-caused bare ground in the riparian area. Bare ground is unprotected soil that is easily worn away and transported by rain or wind. (Note: examples include bare ground from livestock, recreation, and vehicles.) True ☐ False ☐

10 Water is **NOT** artificially added or removed (e.g., weirs, ditching, diversions, dams). True ☐ False ☐

Checklist Summary

How many of these questions did you answer **TRUE**? ☐ and how many did you answer **FALSE**? ☐

Interpreting your Checklist

If you answered **TRUE** to 8 or more of the questions, and the riparian area looks like the one in picture A, it is likely that the riparian area is **healthy**, which means it is performing key riparian functions like storing water, trapping sediment, buffering the impact of flooding, providing primary productivity, and providing fish and wildlife habitat.

If you answered **FALSE** to 3 or 4 of these questions, and the riparian area resembles a combination of pictures A and B, the riparian area is likely **healthy but with problems.** Some riparian functions may be impaired.

If you answered FALSE to 5 or more of the questions, and the riparian area looks like the one in picture B, it is likely that the riparian area is **unhealthy** and not functioning properly.

If you would like more detailed information, contact us (see below):

Checklist summaries that indicate the riparian area is healthy but with problems or unhealthy can often be corrected by changing what you do. For example, cottagers can let the riparian area grow naturally without mowing, adding fertilizer, importing sand, discing, or removing rocks. Producers can manage cattle grazing to avoid heavy grazing and trampling. Evaluate your riparian area again in two to three years - you should see some improvements.

Photo Credits: Blake Mills, Myrna Pearman, Lorne Fitch, Liz Saunders, Michael Gerrand

COWS & FISH
RIPARIAN MANAGEMENT SOCIETY

Working with producers and communities on riparian awareness

Executive Director Lethbridge 403-381-5538
Riparian Specialists: Edmonton 780-427-7940; Airdrie 403-948-8519; Calgary 403-451-1184; Lethbridge 403-382-0927
riparian@cowsandfish.org
Follow us on social media.
www.cowsandfish.org

Printed in Canada 05/Mar26

Cows and Fish Partners
Landowners, Producers and Community Groups, Alberta Beef Producers, Freshwater Conservation Canada, Canadian Cattle Association, Association of Alberta Agricultural Fieldmen, Rural Municipalities of Alberta, Alberta Agriculture and Irrigation, Alberta Environment and Protected Areas, and Alberta Forestry and Parks

Financial support for printing by:
Government of Alberta