

Riparian Notes

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Riparian Areas – Barometers of the Land

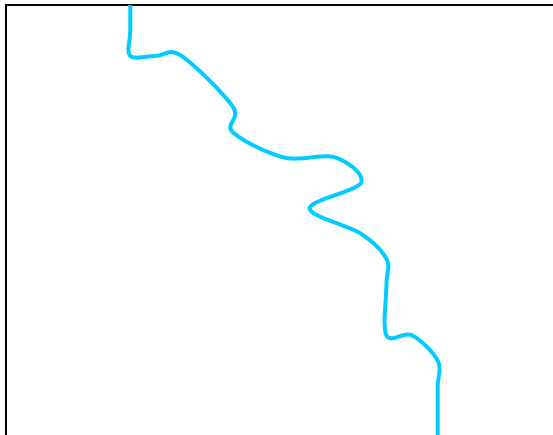
Good riparian management should always be considered merely a subset of good land management. The emphasis of *Riparian Notes* is to focus attention on the narrow but critical band of land that adjoins rivers, creeks and draws, but this is not intended to minimize the need for proper management of the entire upland catchment that drains into these waterways. However, there is a valid basis for looking more closely at riparian areas, since they reflect the general health of the whole landscape.

As a general rule, especially in rangeland settings, when riparian areas are in good shape, the uplands will also be in good shape. While riparian zones may occupy less than 5% of the land area, they can serve as a barometer or indicator of conditions in the entire area. The primary reason for this in rangeland situations is that livestock often concentrate and preferentially graze and loaf in riparian zones. The reasons for this are obvious: drinking water, wading areas (for summertime cooling), green forage and shade.

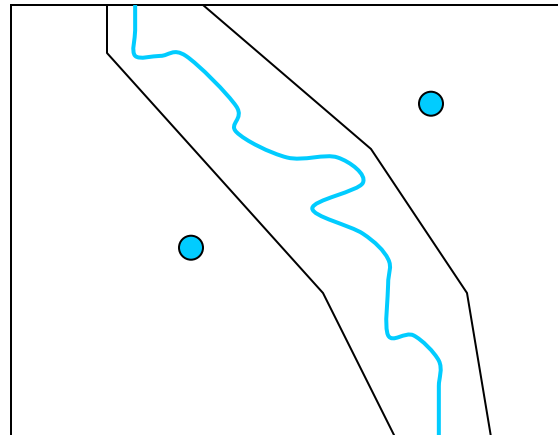
Furthermore, since ranch roads and ranch facilities are often located in close proximity to creeks and rivers, more human activity and livestock activity are likely, and greater impacts should be expected.

In a triage of land treatment priorities, riparian repair and management should be near the top of the list. If an accident victim had a severed artery, a broken arm and numerous cuts and abrasions, the order of medical care would be obvious. Some creeks and riparian areas have been chronically impacted for many years, and it would be prudent to direct attention toward them as soon as possible. There may be other problems in the uplands that also need attention. Creeks and riparian areas in a sense do act as the vascular system of the land. When there are open wounds or chronic problems they should be treated and allowed to heal and recover. The good news is that when riparian areas are healing and recovering, the adjacent uplands will also be improving along with enhanced water quality and wildlife habitat.

Presently, there is a USDA conservation program directed toward practical riparian restoration on private ranches. The funding program is Continuous CRP and the practice is called Riparian Buffer. The examples below show some of the benefits of this program. Contact the NRCS office for details.



Before – 1000 acre pasture. Continuous grazing. Livestock loaf and water in creek. Difficult to apply proper grazing management. Riparian area often heavily grazed and not functional.



After – 2 new fences, 2 new water sources – 90% cost share. Rotational grazing in upland pastures. Cash payments to suspend grazing in riparian area for 10 – 15 years. Riparian area restored. Proper management now possible.