

RIPARIAN AREA MANAGEMENT: PRINCIPLES, POLITICS AND PRACTICES ¹

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Probably the one area of agreement among those involved in riparian area management is that riparian areas are important and must be given close management attention. Each interest group, however, comes to this common ground from a different perspective.

Livestock producers view riparian areas as sources of abundant feed; good grazing management is necessary to maintain the productive value of the riparian for the future. Anglers see riparian areas as critical habitat for fish – their concern is adequate streamflow and shade to keep water temperatures at appropriate levels. Picnickers and other recreationists enjoy the scenic beauty of a riparian meadow. Watershed managers are concerned about the run-off or water production capacity of riparian areas.

Although these perspectives are not necessarily incompatible, it is hard to discern any compatibility from the rhetoric over riparian areas. It is possible, and desirable, to mutually satisfy the one common interest: the welfare of the riparian area. However, no one gets everything they want. Each group achieves some part of its interests, and the overall objective is met in the process.

This is not an easy task, but the tools and the methodology are available. Such concepts as the Experimental Stewardship Program (ESP), technical review teams (TRT's), inter-disciplinary teams (IDT's) and Coordinated Resource Management & Planning (CRM) have proven effective in dealing with other issues as well as with riparian area management. Many of the interest groups are familiar with these processes and are willing to work with them.

If we can agree that we share an objective – the welfare of the riparian area – and a principle – the need to manage the riparian area, we can move on to the more contentious points: The politics of riparian area management and the practice of riparian area management. In discussing the politics, we give our perspective on the forces motivating some of the participants in the issues arising from riparian area management. We will also make some suggestions for problem resolution.

In discussing the practice, we cite examples from the experience of the California Cattlemen's Association members in dealing with state and federal agencies and private groups on riparian area management. We offer some prescriptive measures to enhance the management of riparian areas, as one concerned users group.

Political Implications

The riparian area management issue has grown rapidly in public attention. The increased awareness arises from several different sources: genuine regard for wildlife, watersheds and forage quality for grazing based on scientific analysis; aesthetic appreciation yet uncertainty in the face of a rapidly changing environment, and other concerns. Some of the concerns are understandable to livestock producers, and we will work to resolve these differences. Other concerns we cannot accept, for they are the antithesis of our business.

As an analogy, consider the timber industry and the spotted owl. While some people are legitimately concerned about the status of the spotted owl, others use the spotted owl issue as a shill to obtain their real objective: prohibitions on timber harvests in "old growth" forests!

It is similar with livestock in riparian areas. Those who would remove livestock from the public lands have seized upon riparian area management as their latest tool. They speak of "water quality" and "wildlife," of "pristine purity" and "aesthetic values," but what they really mean is "remove the cattle." (It is tempting to speculate about the basis for their intense dislike of livestock; perhaps as a nation is removed from its agrarian heritage, a rejection of that heritage occurs). Faced with this type of agenda, reaching consensus is difficult or even impossible.

Another interest group at least acknowledges that livestock grazing is a legitimate factor (even a management tool) on riparian areas. They are willing to work with other interests, including the consumptive-but renewable-uses such as timber and grazing. Clearly, however, concerns over water quality, fishery protection and other issues must be considered along with grazing, in the view of this interest group – working together does not mean unanimous agreement.

The mainstream organizations have adopted a position of moderation on the consumptive use side of the issue; they are willing to cooperate with other interests. The California Cattlemen's Association (CCA) has taken this approach. CCA is a sponsor of the CRM program (the first agricultural group to become a sponsor), and we have requested that the Society for Range Man-

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agement (SRM) develop a coalition so that environmental and consumptive use interests can work together on specific watershed and riparian area management questions.

At the extreme, of course, there are the consumptive users who will resist any and all change, preferring to produce livestock in their traditional manner. These people do tend to be as strongly "pro-livestock" as the anti-cattle people are "anti." They point out, not without some basis in fact, that riparian areas can withstand greater grazing pressure and will recover sooner than upland areas. They consider the issue to be overblown in importance.

Where does this leave us in terms of the political overtones of our mutual objective — the welfare of riparian areas? There are two camps that are clearly polarized — the radical preservationist and the rock-ribbed traditionalist livestock producer. But in between these two poles fall a number of groups and individuals. Hopefully, it is they who will set the course for riparian area management.

Federal agencies, principally the U.S. Forest Service, bear the brunt of mediating the conflicts over riparian area management. Since they must be more responsive to the "public interest" than private landowners, they are the first target for changes in management practices. However, we are seeing the focus of riparian area management being broadened to encompass private lands as well.

These agencies are generally fulfilling their difficult role of mediating the conflicting concerns of various interests quite well. Perhaps an indication of their success is the fact that no one is entirely happy with what they are doing. The agencies have embraced the Coordinated Resource Management process and the Experimental Stewardship Program. They are using technical review teams for problem resolution, and interdisciplinary teams which operate on an ad hoc basis to make recommendations on specific problems.

Interestingly enough, the principal state agency involved in the riparian issue, the Department of Fish & Game (DF&G) tends to mirror the views of the more radical groups. Citing the "Public Trust Doctrine" as its authority, the DF&G has filed a number of objections or appeals of county general plans, national forest plans, etc. The DF&G's solution is often a narrow one, focusing exclusively on the wildlife and fisheries aspect of the riparian area.

DF&G's tactics can be heavy-handed: CCA members have been threatened with arrest or fines. Relations between the DF&G and landowners are worse in California than in any other western state — and probably worse than in any state in the nation.

The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CDFFP) also has a role in rangeland manage-

ment, especially on wildland subject to risk of fire and on land considered "hardwood rangeland," where management of oak trees is a consideration. CDF's involvement in riparian areas has been more focused on timber harvest than on rangeland issues.

The debate over riparian area management is advancing through four means, used by all interests in varying degrees: (1) public influence through the media — newspaper articles, television reports and "documentaries," magazine articles, etc.; (2) political influence through direct lobbying, political action committees, volunteer support for campaigns, etc., at both the local and state levels; (3) judicial activity through litigation of specific environmental issues; and (4) heavy involvement in regulatory activity oversight, including formation of "regulatory watchdog committees," and utilization of the appeals processes of the agencies to block or promote activity.

Some groups are more sophisticated than others in availing themselves of these means to influence decisions over riparian areas. As the process for influencing legislation and regulations has changed to include more public involvement, traditional power bases have also changed. Groups that relied upon direct and personal contact are now finding it necessary to argue their case before the public and are becoming more aggressive in doing so.

The political interplay is probably a necessary fact, but it can be frustrating for people who are more interested in direct action to manage riparian areas. While the politics goes on, the work of riparian area management must continue — we cannot afford to lose sight of our objective: the welfare of the riparian area.

These political battles may gradually change the framework for riparian area management. We would prefer, however, to work directly with other groups to resolve problems between us, and seek a more immediate effect on riparian areas.

Practical Riparian Area Management

Before talking of management practices, we need to define "riparian area." Each state and federal agency has a slightly different definition, and definitions vary when applied to different situations. A valley riparian habitat such as in the Sacramento or San Joaquin valleys is different from foothills, desert or mountain riparian areas.

However, a general definition probably suffices: "The area in and along streams containing forage and other plant species that are more dependent upon water than upland species." The real issue is how the area should be managed — from our point of view, how livestock will be managed in the area — so the definition is not so

important. Management decisions should be made "on the ground" where all parties can view the riparian area directly.

Most of the focus in riparian area management is on the stream zone, but all activities in the watershed are important for a riparian area. We must continually be reminded to manage the total resource-base, not just a piece of it.

Managing the total resource requires that we understand all of the factors impacting upon a riparian area, including timber harvest, grazing, road construction, and certain recreational activities like off-highway vehicles, hiking and fishing. All have impacts on riparian areas and appropriate management strategies must include each use.

Grazing has clearly been identified as one – perhaps the first major – use of riparian areas that may need to be changed. Fortunately, some individuals who are truly concerned with use of the resource do understand that livestock can be part of a management plan for riparian areas. They know, too, that livestock producers, if approached properly, are open to efforts to improve riparian areas.

The objections raised to grazing include overgrazing, streambank degradation from trampling and compaction, loss of vegetation which acts as a filter for sediment during periods of flooding, loss of streamside willows and brush to shade the water and maintain its temperature and, to a lesser extent, water quality considerations related to livestock waste. Whether these objections have merit depends upon the circumstances in each case – in riparian area management, blanket statements are generally not appropriate.

Our experience has led us to question each objection in most cases; our first thought is, understandably, whether the motivation behind the objection is for the riparian area or simply an outgrowth of anti-cattle sentiment. Hopefully, we can move away from this position, but it will require acknowledgement that cattle have a legitimate role in riparian area management!

Further, we have been frustrated over attitudes that imply we should be "forever damned" for past practices. These practices may have been standards for the time; often they were based on the recommendations of the agencies and our universities. The bottom line is that our focus should be on resolving problems for the future, rather than on recriminations about past practices.

The livestock industry is accepting responsibility to be part of the solution. By the way, part of the solution is to correct misperceptions of other resource interests about our use of the resource, as well as having our own misperceptions corrected! Being part of the solution also means demonstrating that livestock grazing is an important management tool for riparian areas.

Dr. Sherm Swanson, Extension Range Specialist, University of Nevada, Reno, notes that "All streams are not created equal." His message is that some streams have high potential for rehabilitation, while rehabilitation funds would be wasted on other streams. He has refined a stream classification system that (1) identifies streams by their current state and potential for rehabilitation and (2) identifies management practices that will lead to riparian area improvement.

The work done by Dr. Swanson, and many other range professionals, provides a livestock operator with the kind of information necessary to evaluate and manage riparian areas. He also identifies "best" management practices (depending upon the current status and potential for rehabilitation) for each type of stream. Where "best" practices are not feasible, he recommends "acceptable" practices; again, the recommended practices are ones that producers can use as a practical, working framework for riparian area management.

Some of the practices include (1) establishing riparian (meadow) pastures, then grazing these pastures with either rotation grazing or season-long grazing at light stocking rates; (2) developing sources of water near streams rather than forcing livestock to streams to drink; (3) concentrating grazing in the early growing season or at the peak of the season; (4) herding cattle to assure better distribution over the entire grazing area (both riparian and upland); (5) changing salt distribution to influence grazing and stock watering patterns, and (6) improving range in upland areas, including seeding, to improve forage potential in those areas.

We would implement these methods through the very processes that federal agencies use. For example, we would participate in the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management Experimental Stewardship Program where decisions are based upon input of technical review or interdisciplinary teams. It is essential that permit holders participate in these teams and this process.

The state agencies have less well-defined processes; The Department of Forestry & Fire Protection and the State Board of Forestry rely upon the Range Management Advisory Committee (RMAC) for some input on range and riparian issues. The Fish & Game Commission, however, does not have a means for formal input from range users and professionals. Perhaps the Fish & Game Commission would consider establishing a range and riparian advisory committee – or would use the existing RMAC.

Working through these existing processes and directly with other interest groups, we hope to make progress on riparian area management. However, some of the issues may be sufficiently complex or have such significant economic implications, that we may have to resort to litigation to sort the complexities out. Recent U.S. Supreme Court decisions do offer some assurance that

landowners have redress from unreasonable costs or loss of property use resulting from regulatory agency decisions. These cases may become important in the riparian area management debate.

Prescriptive Measures for Riparian Area Management

It is especially frustrating to livestock producers that so many interests ignore or do not understand the role of livestock on public lands. To satisfy a variety of environmental and land use issues, the best answer may be to keep the livestock on the land. However, many are not willing to even listen to this concept.

The agendas of those who are unwilling to consider a role for livestock producers may be self-defeating. Consider the case in which removal of livestock from public lands causes a ranch to no longer be economically viable. The rancher must then consider alternative uses for the base ranch property, including development. So, although the cattle are off the public land, the valley or foothill ranch that once provided open space and wildlife habitat is divided into 20 to 40 acre ranchettes – or smaller parcels.

The first prescriptive measure, then, is to broaden the focus of riparian area management to account for the role of livestock producers in providing values beyond their use of the riparian area. However, this means recognizing their need to earn a living from the available resources.

Riparian area management requires money, sometimes significant amounts of money. Often, certain interests argue that who should pay depends upon who benefits, who bears the cost if the work is not done and what caused the condition in the first place. While there may be some merit to a benefit - cost debate, it would be unfortunate to be unduly mired in a debate over costs.

Sometimes, management practices were based upon then-current knowledge; and cooperation between land users and federal agencies led to the policies that allowed degradation of the resource base. In those cases, assigning "blame" and costs may be difficult or even inequitable. Instead, we hope to be able to shift the focus to what needs to be done, and attempt to gain consensus that all interests will share in the costs of riparian area management.

Our second prescriptive measure is to establish public funding for riparian projects deemed to be in the public interest. If there is truly a public interest, then part of the costs should be allocated to the public, as well as

to any private beneficiaries. The costs born by livestock owners should be credited to them as either an in-kind or a direct contribution to the project.

The third prescriptive measure is to assure that management issues are addressed through a statewide, multiple interest resource coalition. It is critical that representatives of the several interests participate – and commit – to the coalition objective: The welfare of the riparian area.

The California Cattlemen's Association is committed to developing this kind of coalition. We have requested that the Society for Range Management (SRM) that it, the organization representing range professionals, work with other professional groups and trade and environmental organizations to establish this coalition.

Similar interests in Oregon have already developed a coalition that may be an example for us in California. The Oregon Watershed Improvement Coalition (OWIC) was established by the Northwest Section of the SRM; its purpose is to bring together scientists, users and other interests to work on specific projects. OWIC has funds available for cooperative projects with state and federal agencies, landowners and other interests to directly change riparian areas. OWIC has been successful in mediating conflicts between disparate interests, and has a record of successful riparian area rehabilitation.

There is precedent for the coalition and the cooperation here in California, too. The state has one program that provides financial incentive to landowners for fisheries and wildlife habitat maintenance and development, called the "Ranch for Wildlife" or P.L. 580 program. The program is generally successful. More important, the program offers an incentive, a positive reward, to modify or change production practices, rather than the disincentives that are all too often used.

Conclusion

We have tried to cover, in broad overview, the concerns of livestock producers, how we as livestock producers perceive some of the other interests and what we think can be done to resolve any differences. We are committed to being part of the solution to problems of riparian area management. We urge and invite other interests to join us in formation of a coalition to address questions on riparian area management, and to work toward achieving our mutual goal of protecting the welfare of the riparian areas.