Riparian Management Improves Western Rangeland

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Riparian areas are essential to the livelihood of ranchers in Nevada. Protecting these areas of periodic moisture and greener vegetation can mean the difference between success and failure for many ranches. Bill Gibbs of Wells, Nev., has worked 40 years to properly manage the wetlands of his cattle ranch. The results are very positive.

It is hard to believe that over 750 head of cattle graze the riparian areas. Grass is growing on the creek banks and trees have returned, something Gibbs hasn't seen since the 1930's. Vegetation is growing on the steeper banks, holding the soil in place and stabilizing the banks from further erosion. Beavers have moved into the area and their new dam slows the water flowing in the creek. Cattle rest nearby and dot the hillsides, grazing leisurely.

"Ranchers have been getting bad publicity lately about riparian areas, but people have to understand that we depend on these areas and we are trying to take care of them," said Gibbs, former Elko County Commissioner for 12 years and a supervisor of the Northeast Elko Conservation District for 24 years. "Our cattle use the streams and wetlands for shade, water and food and, if we abuse these areas, we are only hurting ourselves."

Gibbs owns 2,500 acres and leases 17,000 acres from the Bureau of Land Management. He realized many years ago that his cattle were starting to over-utilize the riparian areas. To promote better grazing, Gibbs developed watering troughs and ponds, spacing them over his pastures allow-
ing the cattle to graze uniformly. Approximately 40 watering troughs, spring developments and ponds have been installed on the ranch in addition to three intermittent streams—Badger, Willow, and Hot Creeks. He also scattered salt licks on the ridges away from the water to encourage the cattle to graze larger areas.

In 1971, an allotment management plan was developed with the Elko Office of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Gibbs' public grazing allotment was divided into 3 pastures, grazing one early, grazing the second later in the season, and leaving the third completely rested for the entire year. The grazing pattern rotates so that each pasture is rested once every three years. "This has made all the difference in the world," said Gibbs. "Not only have we improved our meadowlands but we've increased our weaning weights 30 to 40 pounds and our yearling weights 50 to 60 pounds."

The meadowlands near the house spread out over approximately 600 acres. Gibbs uses them for wintering his cattle and for hay production during the summer. He has replaced three old brush and rock structures with concrete structures to help stabilize the creek and for flood control. The Soil Conservation Service (SCS) also helped him design a more efficient irrigation system for his limited water supply.

In addition to the beaver returning to the creek, Gibbs has seen sage grouse, Hungarian partridge, antelope and deer using the range. This gives him even more incentive to continue his improvement efforts. "Now that we've stabilized the streams and meadows, I'm going to start improving the private rangeland," said Gibbs. "We need to do some brush control and seed some better grasses for spring forage."

Gibbs' grandfather bought the original homestead in 1915, moving north from Clover Valley. His father, W.H., formed the corporation, W.H. Gibbs Co., under which Gibbs does business. Gibbs' wife, Mary, two of their seven children, and four of their 15 grandchildren live on the ranch.

Son William H. is part owner and his son, Matt, plans to finish school and return to the ranch. "I think our efforts have been highly successful, and I'm really proud of what we've accomplished," said Gibbs. "I think my grandfather would be proud, too."