

# The Importance of Rancher Input in Solving Riparian Problems

Heather Smith Thomas

One of the biggest assets in solving any riparian problem is the knowledge and experience of the rancher using the area. This factor is often overlooked by the range scientists and ecologists trying to come up with management solutions for riparian areas. No one knows the allotment, the livestock, or the management alternatives better than the rancher who has been there for years. As one range scientist stated, "Riparian management is no problem; it just takes someone out there with his eyes open, looking for problems and solving them." There are lots of ways to keep cattle where you want them, to use the range properly.

**Each area is different**, with different solutions to different problems. Fencing cows away from streams is usually not the best way to solve a riparian grazing problem. Ways need to be found to make the cattle use the allotment properly. The main riparian grazing "problem" is uneven distribution of cattle, caused by concentrating them too long in the riparian areas. This problem can be solved in a number of ways.

Most cattlemen know there is no substitute for riding and checking on the cattle, keeping them properly distributed and teaching them to use all parts of a range—not just the bottom lands. The rancher who is not out there riding is not going to see a problem developing soon enough to take corrective action. A University of Nevada range specialist has said, "It's the problems we didn't prevent that have us sweating out national legislation today. My worst apprehension about national legislation requiring 'projects' and 'action plans' is that well-meaning people will interpret these words to mean 'build enclosures'. The job is to solve riparian problems *before* they get the fence built."

**Some problems might be solved by adopting** a different grazing system, such as rest rotation, deferred rotation, or short duration grazing. Another alternative would be to change the season of use for part of the allotment.

In a really bad area, a riparian "pasture" is more feasible than an enclosure. In these instances, a small pasture is created within an allotment, and managed separately. The small pasture includes the riparian area and a portion of the uplands. Cattle numbers and season of use can be controlled to achieve a certain forage use. In some experimental riparian pastures, use of the upland forage actually exceeded use of the streamside forage. This is the opposite of the typical allotment. The relatively small size

of the riparian pasture puts all the forage within the cow's potential "home range", with a more balanced use of all forage. The timing and location of use in the specially managed riparian pasture can be controlled, to get the degree of grazing needed for improving the riparian area. Eliminating grazing from these areas is not socially, economically or politically acceptable, nor environmentally sound in most cases. We need alternatives other than excluding livestock from streambanks. With special riparian pastures it is possible to efficiently graze sensitive areas without damage.

**In most allotments there are simpler solutions.** Turning the cows out earlier in the season works in some areas, where they will use the green uplands rather than the streambanks. In one tree plantation area, this approach kept cows out of a wet meadow all summer. The grazed upland areas stayed green and the cows kept returning to the palatable regrowth.

A recent grazing decision in one area of Nevada allowed grazing earlier in the spring when the cheatgrass was green. This not only solved a riparian problem but prevented a fire hazard as well. In some other regions, later grazing may work better, when the streamside has dried out and trampling damage is less. Water developments and salt placement away from the streams on the uplands encourage cattle to stay out of the bottoms.

Probably the main ingredient for solving riparian problems is a rancher who cares about his livestock, providing salt and water developments and training them to use the whole range, not just turning them out and forgetting them. Yearlings that grow up on the range as calves, especially if their mothers were good range cattle, tend to use the higher elevations and steep, rugged terrain. Yearlings are usually curious and ambitious travelers, and wander all over a range. But newly purchased yearlings or cows that don't know the range will often spend their time in the bottoms or walking the fence, trying to go back where they came from. Cattle that have no prior experience with range (growing up on irrigated pasture, for instance) are often hard on a range and hard on themselves, unless someone takes time to retrain them.

**Cows that have grown up on a certain range** or have been trained to use it properly will actually prefer to spend time at the higher elevations, on ridges where a little breeze helps keep the flies away. They prefer the cooler uplands to the hot bottoms. The cattle whose owners never ride or train them are the ones that generally spend their time on the lower fences or stream bottoms.

*Editor's Note:* The author is a freelance writer who with her husband have been raising crossbred beef cattle on a small mountain ranch in Idaho for 25 years.

Differences in terrain, elevation, abundance of water or lack of it, differences in types of cattle and how they are managed, can make for different results in how the cattle use or overuse a specific range area. It's difficult to make specific guidelines. Every problem has to be approached on a case-by-case basis.

For instance, a three pasture Forest allotment on Wolf Creek in eastern Oregon has terrain that could cause riparian problems. For most of its length, the creek is in a steep-walled rocky canyon. Wolf Creek (a big stream in spring, almost dry in late summer) runs the length of the three pastures. Cows are usually turned out on the lower pasture in late spring, moved to the middle pasture in summer, and by late July are put in the top pasture for the rest of the season. The use in each pasture is at basically the same time every year, though some years the middle pasture is used first instead of the lower one.

**Most people, given this information,** would automatically conclude that the riparian area along this creek would be badly beaten out and abused. Instead, the streamside vegetation is healthy, with many alders up to 20 feet tall, plus willows of various age classes, throughout the length of the creek. The health of this creek has improved dramatically over the past 10 to 20 years; brush and other streamside vegetation has flourished.

A neighboring allotment has a Forest Service enclosure, fencing out cattle and elk, on a portion of the middle fork of Wolf Creek. In the enclosure, the alders and willows are increasing, providing shade for fish, and bank stability, but no better than the alders and willows in the grazed allotment. The most striking and obvious difference is how sick the grass has become in the enclosure after 10 years without grazing. The other significant point is the denuded area immediately outside the enclosure, where elk and cattle travel. The animals have been forced into a restricted area of the canyon away from the stream. This provides stark evidence of the problems that can occur when a creek is fenced off from cattle use in a narrow canyon.

How did the neighboring allotment make all that improvement, while sustaining regular livestock use every year? The answer is proper livestock management. The improving health of this allotment and its watershed is an excellent example of intensive management and good cow sense, by a rancher who cares. It doesn't really matter how many pastures or what type of grazing system is being used; the real key to success on any given allotment is the rancher who is looking after the cattle, making sure the cattle are where they belong, caring about the land. Sometimes in our zeal to do "research" or to try new systems or to figure out more "scientific" methods, we tend to overlook some of the old ways that have stood the

test of time.

**Water developments away from the streams,** strategically placed drift fences, regular riding and salting, are helpful tools, but the main necessity is someone who understands cattle. The people making the range plans and doing the riding need to understand cattle and why they graze or congregate in certain areas. Cattle use of a range is a lot more complicated than distance from water and steepness of terrain. There are a number of ranges in the Rocky Mountain West that some range experts claim can't be utilized by cattle, but in reality are very well utilized by cattle trained to use those steeper areas, putting less pressure on the bottoms. Some ranchers' cattle use difficult range more efficiently than other cattle use an "easy" range. Cow sense, the most important ingredient for solving riparian problems, is usually overlooked by the people trying to find solutions.

Dealing properly with riparian problems has been hindered in the past because there has been very little effort by the land management agencies to work cooperatively with the ranchers in developing goals or using the evaluating methods for solving streambank problems. Often the rancher has more experience and expertise in some of the critical aspects of the problem. Without the rancher's input, most projects are doomed to failure. The ranchers should be a part of the process, since they are the ones managing the cattle.

Recent years have brought some hope, with cooperative management agreements, the stewardship program, and other efforts of the land management agencies to work with the ranchers. These efforts have shown real promise in resolving many resource problems. The Oregon Watershed Improvement Coalition is one example of a group of diverse interests who have joined together in riparian management. This coalition includes the Oregon Cattlemen's Association, Public Lands Restoration Task Force, Oregon Forest Industries Council, Oregon Environmental Council, Oregon Trout, and the Oregon Natural Resources Council. The goal of the coalition is to ensure long-term benefits from riparian areas and their associated uplands, improving these systems in a way that fits the varied land use objectives of different land owners and managers. They recognize the need to stop fighting over every last drop of water in every creek. When people stop fighting and start working together, most problems can be solved. The environmental interests who are truly concerned about the land, rather than using it as a political pawn for more power and control over who uses it and how, should eventually come to realize that the rancher is not an enemy, but actually the greatest ally in working toward more healthy rangelands and riparian areas.