Focusing on FORAGE

PHOTO BY AMY PHILLIPS

Grazing Riparian Areas

With management you can graze these special areas. Here's how.

by ***Kindra Gordon***

Riparian areas — the productive, lush, green zones along creeks and streams — have been and continue to be a contentious issue among land owners, federal land permittees, land management agencies and the public, especially in the West. As interest grows in multiple uses on public lands and more issues arise with threatened and endangered species, grazing livestock on riparian areas continues to draw debate.

In this Q&A, we visit with Sandra Wyman, rangeland management specialist, about what works and what doesn't when grazing these delicate areas. Wyman is with the National Riparian Service Team (NRST), a group based in Prineville, Ore., and comprised of Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service specialists in partnership with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

Should livestock be removed from riparian areas?

"There's often a perception that grazing livestock in riparian areas is bad, and no livestock in these areas is good," says Wyman. But she emphasizes that perception is not accurate. "In many situations, removing livestock from riparian areas is not necessary," she says.

Instead Wyman suggests the implementation of proper management strategies to develop a balance between utilizing the forage in these zones and allowing time for riparian areas to rest and recover.

For instance, she says, "You can't just turn your cattle out in the spring and round them up in the fall. You need to monitor animal performance, the forage resource and the physical condition of the riparian area, and be prepared to adjust grazing use."

During the 1990s Bob Ehrhart, currently a Natural Resources Program leader with Oregon State University, studied healthy riparian zones on 34 ranches in Montana to determine what had been done to get, or keep, these areas in healthy condition. From his research he found seasons of use and lengths of grazing periods varied greatly, but the commonality was that all of the producers were actively involved in the management of their property and were concerned about the land.

Bottom line, "Management, not a particular grazing system, is the key to keeping riparian areas healthy," says Wyman.

As a guideline, are there certain times of year when you should avoid grazing riparian zones?

When it comes to season of use and length of time to graze riparian areas, Wyman says it must be tailored to each situation. "You can't cookie cut this. It depends on the soils, hydrology of the area, and the goals of the ranch operation and public land if applicable," she says. For instance, she says the dormant season — winter — is when plants are generally least vulnerable, but if that doesn't fit the operation's grazing needs because they get too much snow, it's not the right solution.

"Any season can work, and any season can not work," Wyman says, depending on resource conditions and how the resource is managed. She adds, "That is why we recommend monitoring and having producers set goals for triggers such as stubble height on key forage species." Then based on that information, land managers need to evaluate forage use and riparian area condition, and if necessary make adjustments.

As an example, if livestock graze a riparian area in the hot season, once plants have been grazed to the stubble height you've set as a limit or if acceptable streambank alteration levels are met, Wyman says it is time to move the animals to a new location so those plants have time to rebound. "The key is you want to graze a plant once and then allow about 20-30 days rest. Without rest, a plant can't photosynthesize and maintain root vigor," she explains.

What are common mistakes you see land managers make in riparian management?

Wyman says a frequent mistake she sees is moving the herd to a new pasture, but leaving a few animals behind. "When riparian areas aren't completely rested, even as few as six to 10 head can keep the area in poor condition if they are left there season long to graze," she says.

Another mistake is failing to monitor. Monitoring within season is important — especially to evaluate if the plant resources are going in the direction you want over the long term. Wyman suggests setting reasonable goals and tracking things like species, climate and precipitation. In addition, she recommends long-term trend monitoring of riparian herbaceous plants and woody species regeneration along the water, as well as in key areas of the uplands. A healthy riparian area with a diverse mix of wetland plants will be able to better hold water in the soil versus letting it all runoff into the stream.

What about fencing out riparian areas? Is it necessary?

Fencing out riparian areas can work, but Wyman says it's usually unnecessary. "Fencing off all riparian areas is very expensive, topographically not feasible and creates wildlife concerns because it can affect migration patterns," she says. "We may recommend exclusion fences if it is a real degraded area that needs a jump start."

Wyman suggests using techniques to attract livestock to upland areas of the pasture so riparian zones aren't so overused. She notes that research on low-stress livestock handling, where animals were slowly herded to upland areas and kept mothered up, has shown good results. Using low-moisture supplements to attract animals to different areas of the pasture is also showing promise.

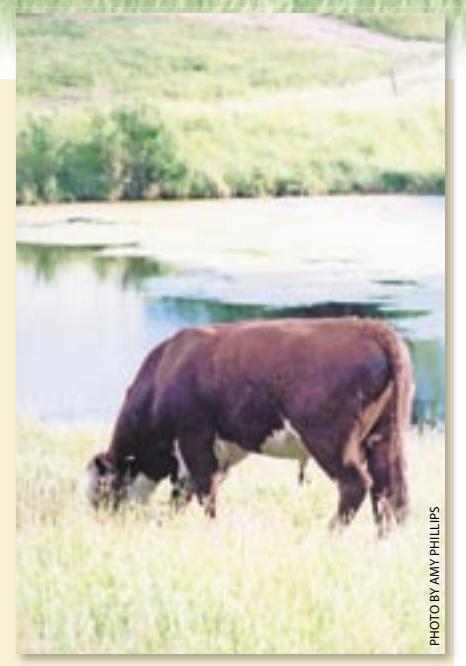
Developing alternative water sources is a bit more of an investment but can be highly effective. "We've seen many producers use portable solar panels to pump water out of a lake, pond or stream and into a tank. Generally livestock like to water out of a tank versus a stream," says Wyman. She reports that research has shown livestock will spend as much as 90% less time on riparian areas if they have an alternative water source to drink from. **HW**

More information about NRST

The National Riparian Service Team (NRST) is devoted to assisting both public and private groups in developing a collaborative approach to riparian management. The team's strategy involves bringing all interested parties together in a community (land owners, permittees, agencies and the public) to encourage communication, build trust and create a common vision for the resource.

Sandra Wyman, rangeland management specialist and a member of NRST, says the team has primarily provided assistance in the West where conflicts have risen involving private and public lands. Team members have also worked with private landowners and groups with watershed issues across North America.

Wyman reports that communication is often the key to developing relationships among groups who initially seem to have differing viewpoints. "When you get all interested parties together on the land, look at how the riparian area is supposed to function first and then share what each group's concerns are in a respectful manner," she says. "Through this process people do become more informed and are often able to come up with a shared vision and work together to develop potential solutions." For more information about the services provided by the NRST, visit *http://www.blm.gov/or/programs/nrst/*.



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