

Alarming Issues

A Wake-up Call for Riparian Areas

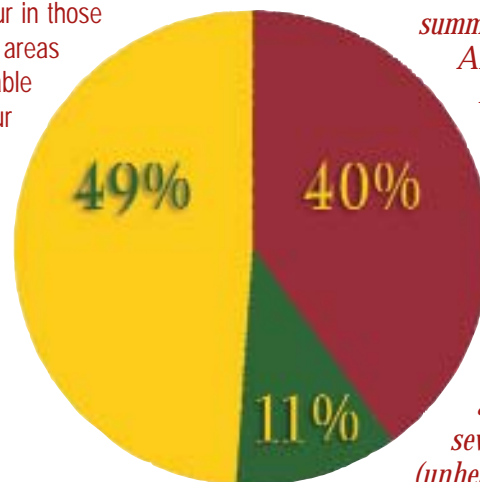


A mid-1940s view of a stream in the foothills of southwestern Alberta shows extensive willow growth in the riparian area, stable banks and a narrow channel with a willow canopy.



Fifty years later there are a few remnant willows and a wider channel with unstable streambanks.

We may tend to think of the products of riparian areas as forage for livestock and wildlife, shelter for livestock and ourselves and fish for angling, but the key element is water. Concerns about water will focus attention on the watersheds that produce this vital resource and on the uses that occur in those watersheds. Intact watersheds with healthy riparian areas will provide downstream water users with acceptable water quality. Those downstream users, including our urban neighbours, might also think about where their water comes from and how to help those that manage the watershed.



We face real issues based on a summary of riparian health for Alberta. Measurements of riparian health help us understand the proportion of reaches where all ecological functions are being performed (healthy), those with stress and some impairment (healthy, with problems) and the ones that are severely damaged (unhealthy). About 11% of Alberta's riparian areas are healthy, 49% are healthy, with problems and 40% are unhealthy.



1920

In 1920, the riparian area of this river north of Edmonton was heavily wooded and the surrounding watershed shows few changes.



2001

Eighty years later, clearing, settlement, drainage, channelization and roading have resulted in a significant loss of woody vegetation, extensive watershed change and loss of many riparian functions.

Livestock grazing in Alberta dates back over a hundred years. Livestock producers of today can look back on a wealth of experience gained through surviving drought periods, dealing with the problems of overgrazing, ever-changing weather and markets. Nothing is perfect though and sometimes we need to be reminded of that history to ensure we don't repeat the mistakes of the past. Some acknowledgement of today's riparian issues would help us all move towards solving the problems. The issues we face didn't just occur; they have developed quietly, have gone largely unnoticed but are now cumulative in their effect.

Many ranchers and livestock operators acknowledge that riparian landscapes require another look and are beginning to think seriously about how to modify grazing to improve the health of these areas. Some have already figured this out and provide us with examples of careful range management practices which we can all learn from.

How we face the issues surrounding riparian areas and the management decisions we make now will influence the future use, health and productivity of these green zones.