

RIPARIAN AREAS

Important Natural Assets



WHAT ARE RIPARIAN AREAS

Riparian areas are those strips of green vegetation alongside streams, creeks, rivers, lakes, sloughs and any other small or large bodies of water. They are found in all parts of the province—in the northern boreal forest, parkland, foothills, mountains and prairie grasslands. Although riparian areas make up a small percentage of the landscape, their importance and impact is far reaching.

WATER

Healthy riparian areas provide a nearby source of clean water that can be managed for livestock use. Riparian areas act as filters to keep sediment and pollutants from entering the water resulting in clean water for humans and quality habitat for fish and wildlife.

LAND

Healthy riparian areas also provide sustainable forage for livestock grazing. Riparian areas act as a sponge to collect and slowly release needed moisture over the landscape. Riparian vegetation helps prevent soil erosion on banks of creeks, rivers, sloughs, potholes, and lakes. They also provide habitat for insects, birds, reptiles, amphibians and micro-organisms which ensure healthy, functioning ecosystems.



WHAT ALBERTA RANCHERS ARE SAYING

“During a drought is when we truly realize the importance of well-maintained riparian areas. When these areas are looked after properly, we can be assured of extra forage and good quality water for our livestock and for wildlife. Maintaining healthy riparian areas requires educating ourselves and managing our livestock. In the end, everyone benefits,”
Darwayne Claypool, northern Alberta rancher.

“Remember the future: give water a clean bed. A clean stream is like a good drink—wonderful to experience and essential to survive,”
Francis Gardner, southern Alberta rancher.

When riparian areas are healthy, riparian forage is productive for grazing and tends to produce more forage and on a stable basis than in uplands, especially during drought. Healthy riparian areas should have all the age classes of desirable woody species: seedlings, saplings, mature and decadent.



Healthy riparian areas grow a biological diversity of plants such as: poplar species, willow, red osier dogwood, tall sedges, tall manna grass, reed grasses, bulrush and cattails. Manage your grazing to maintain these species.

Photo Credit: Cows and Fish

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about riparian areas you can contact:

Alberta government Rangeland Agrologists or Range Management Specialists at 310-0000, or visit www.srd.gov.ab.ca/land

Alberta Sustainable Resource Development's number one goal is to ensure Alberta's public lands, including rangelands, are healthy, productive, and sustainable.

Cows and Fish Program
Riparian Specialists at 403-381-5538, or visit www.cowsandfish.org

The Alberta Riparian Habitat Management Society (Cows and Fish) which strives to foster a better understanding of how improvements in grazing management on riparian areas can enhance landscape health and productivity, for the benefit of cattle producers and others who use and value riparian areas.

Other sources:

www.albertabeef.org
www.aesa.ca
www.albertaefp.com
www.agric.gov.ab.ca

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MANAGE GRAZING IN RIPARIAN AREAS

Your grazing management efforts in being a good steward of the landscape (both land and water) will make a big difference in ensuring riparian areas remain healthy for future use.

EVERYONE HAS A ROLE IN THIS PROCESS. HERE'S WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- Riparian areas require operational planning, management and monitoring.
- Know what is growing in the riparian area—some areas such as willow meadows are graze-able and others such as black spruce-Labrador tea bogs are not.
- Most riparian areas can support woody vegetation (trees and shrubs) which are important to help maintain healthy riparian areas and provide benefits such as clean water. Ensure your livestock only lightly browse desirable woody plants. This will allow young woody plants to continue to grow to maturity.
- Balance animal numbers with the available forage supply.



- Defer spring grazing to help promote plant vigour and increase grazing days available.
- Avoid grazing in riparian areas when soft, very wet, or muddy.
- Construct alternative watering locations away from riparian areas.
- Avoid placing attractants like salt, minerals and oilers in riparian areas.

- Use grazing systems like deferred and rest rotational grazing systems.
- Ensure riparian areas receive rest during the growing season.

Photo Credit: Cows and Fish

- Learn more about what healthy riparian areas are all about.
- Monitor riparian areas to nip problems in the bud at early stages of investigation.
- Take action when you see signs of unhealthy riparian areas such as loss of woody cover, erosion, presence of weeds, and loss of desirable forage plants.
- To aid in the healing process, and depending on the severity of the problem, livestock may have to be removed from the unhealthy area on a seasonal or longer term basis. Temporary fencing may be required.
- When you reintroduce grazing into the recovered riparian area, monitor to ensure problems have been corrected, and healthy conditions can be maintained.



HERE IS WHAT ALBERTA SUSTAINABLE RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT STAFF WILL DO:

- Rangeland Agrologists inspect grazing dispositions for health and compliance.
- Staff can assist you with learning more about riparian health and monitoring.
- SRD partners with groups like Cows and Fish, and conducts research and demonstration, and tool development that helps sustain, healthy riparian areas for future generations.



Photo Credit: Cows and Fish