

Cows and Fish

Alberta Riparian Habitat Management Program

Cows and Fish: Facing the Issues



Riparian areas are portions of the landscape strongly influenced by water and are recognised by water-loving vegetation along rivers, streams, lakes, springs, ponds and seeps. These “green zones” are one of the most ecologically diverse ecosystems in the world. “Healthy” riparian areas are crucial for sustaining a majority of fish and wildlife species, maintaining functioning watersheds, providing good water quality and supply, forage for livestock, and supporting people on the landscape.

Today, riparian areas are seen to be among the most valuable, productive, and vulnerable areas for the agriculture sector. Currently in Alberta, public concern on water quality issues are foreshadowing the United States experience where the concern over these land use issues has led to legislated solutions. This growing public concern raises the need to enhance and expand current land management efforts that follow a proactive, co-operative, community based approach to address riparian management issues.

The Cows and Fish partnership was established in 1992 to foster a better understanding of how improvements in grazing management on riparian areas can enhance landscape health and productivity, for the benefit of ranchers and others who use and value riparian areas. Our purpose is really about creating a better understanding about ecological processes and land use. Previous experience tells us with better information and understanding about landscape processes, local communities and producers can make better decisions on land use, to sustain agriculture, fish and wildlife populations, watershed function, and clean water supplies for everyone.

Since 1992, our focus has been on developing and delivering a successful awareness and education program. Since our inception, 10,000 producers, land managers, and the public have been reached through workshops, presentations, field days, and demonstration site tours across the province. In addition, the partnership, through local community effort, has established 22 demonstration and profile sites to illustrate and evaluate riparian grazing strategies, and a monitoring program to define the costs and benefits of riparian grazing. Two awareness and education booklets and one video have been produced. Nearly 22,000 copies of *Caring for the Green Zone: Riparian areas and grazing management* have been distributed throughout western Canada and the USA. Thus far, Cows and Fish program success has been based on “putting common sense to common practice”. Simply, it’s first getting together and working with ranchers and local communities to find out what grazing strategies work and benefit their operations and which don’t, while maintaining and protecting riparian health. Secondly, it’s sharing this information so that other producers can benefit from that experience.

Current emphasis within the program is to assist producers, producer groups, municipalities, and local communities address riparian management issues on a watershed basis by obtaining baseline information on riparian “health” or function. This riparian health assessment provides a “state of environment report” enabling producers and others to partner with local land managers to identify and effectively develop plans to address specific land use issues. A couple of new “tools” being developed from this work includes a *Landowners Guide to Riparian Health* and a riparian classification manual.

The most powerful tool is the ability to work with producers at the local community and watershed level. Working locally to develop common goals and objectives for entire watersheds is rewarding—it helps keep people on the landscape. Cows and Fish assists people develop their own approach to riparian and rangeland management specific to their area. Lastly, riparian management tools developed with the community allow people to improve landscape health, for their benefit and for others who use and enjoy these “green zones”. A key feature empowering the Cows and Fish program to help facilitate this process is the declaration of ownership of the riparian grazing issue by cattlemen, through the Alberta Cattle Commission (ACC) and the Canadian Cattleman’s Association (CCA).

Cows and Fish Partnership: Alberta Cattle Commission; Trout Unlimited Canada; Canadian Cattleman’s Association; Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development; Alberta Environment, Department of Fisheries and Oceans; and Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration

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Working with producers and communities on riparian awareness