

Chronology of Definition and System Development

The Service completed riparian mapping projects for several agencies in Arizona in the early 1990's. Additional projects were conducted for the National Park Service in Nevada, and the Bureau of Land Management in Wyoming. Each project included a variety of definitions, classifications, and mapping conventions. The Service was regularly asked to map riparian areas in the western United States, but lacked a standard definition and conventions to guide the mapping.

Riparian was an important discussion topic at the National Wetlands Inventory Regional Coordinators' Meeting in Tucson, Arizona, in January 1997. A commitment was made at the meeting to assemble a National Wetlands Inventory committee of habitat and cartographic specialists to develop the Service's riparian definition and mapping conventions.

A group of Service employees met in March, 1997, and produced a draft riparian document which contained a definition, a classification system, and mapping conventions. The group included NWI Coordinators and Assistant Coordinators from the western states; Washington Office staff; and a cartographic specialist from the National Wetlands Inventory Center in St. Petersburg, Florida. Service support staff from Regional and Field Offices provided additional input.

The draft document was then reviewed by NWI staff in all of the Regions, in Washington, and the National Wetlands Inventory Center in St. Petersburg, Florida. Following that review, the revision was sent for review to all Service Divisions and Field Offices with a request for a critical review. During this time, the draft procedures were used by the Service for wetland and riparian mapping in Great Basin National Park, Nevada, as part of an interagency agreement with the National Park Service.

Subsequent to the Service review and further updating of the draft document, seven Service employees met in Great Basin National Park, Nevada, during late May, 1997, to field test the definition and conventions and to evaluate their effectiveness in a field situation. As part of the draft map review process, Park Service personnel field-checked over 700 sites mapped as riparian to validate the procedures. Field checking revealed that the draft procedures were used successfully to identify and map riparian areas using aerial photographs. Field checking also revealed that some changes in the draft document should be considered.

Paramount among these was the fact that the microclimatic conditions that are responsible for riparian area formation and identification in Alaska are vastly different compared to those in the lower 48 states. Subsequently, the draft was refocused to apply only to areas of the arid west where mean annual evaporation exceeds mean annual precipitation. The Alaska Regional Wetlands Coordinator concurred with this decision.

Another consideration from the Nevada field work was the necessity to change the focus of the definition from one based on the species make up and physiognomy of woody vegetation on the ground, to one based on the signature of vegetation observable from remotely-sensed data. This issue was addressed in the subsequent revision of the draft.

An "Operational Draft" document was prepared in July 1997 which considered input from the Service and the experiences in Great Basin National Park. This document was called an Operational Draft to symbolize the fact that the Service was satisfied with what had been produced, and would use the definition and conventions for mapping purposes, but was still receptive to improvement if additional information or experience indicated that changes were needed.