

RIPARIAN FUNCTIONS, VALUES AND ISSUES

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RIPARIAN areas are lands adjacent to creeks, streams and rivers where vegetation is strongly influenced by the presence of water. Riparian areas may comprise less than 1% of the area in the western United States, but they are among the most productive and valuable of all lands.

The presence of water and green vegetation makes riparian areas attractive and important to domestic livestock grazing adjacent, drier uplands. Fish, of course, are totally dependent upon the surface waters within riparian areas. These areas are the most important habitat for the majority of western wildlife species, and are essential to many.*

Many other values of riparian areas are not well known, and commonly are misunderstood. While occupying relatively small areas of land, riparian areas can strongly influence how watersheds function. By influencing the timing and quality of water produced, the condition of riparian areas can have significant, far-reaching, economic and environmental consequences.

Diversity of vegetation is an important characteristic of riparian areas in good condition. Woody and herbaceous plants slow flood

flows and provide a protective blanket against the erosive force of water. Their foliage shields the soil from wind and sunlight, which keeps soil temperatures low and reduces evaporation. They produce a variety of root systems that bind the soil and hold it in place.

Riparian vegetation filters out sediment which builds streambanks and forms productive wet meadows and floodplains and reduces sedimentation of water supply and hydroelectric reservoirs.



*For example, in the Great Basin of southeastern Oregon, more than 75% of terrestrial wildlife species are dependent upon or use riparian habitats. In southeastern Wyoming more than 75% of all wildlife species depend on riparian habitats. In Arizona and New Mexico, 80% of all vertebrates depend on riparian areas for at least half their life cycles; more than half of these are totally dependent on riparian areas. Riparian areas provide habitat for more species of birds than all other western rangeland vegetation types combined. More than half of all bird species in the southwestern U.S. are completely dependent upon riparian areas.