



MISSION STATEMENT

HEALTHY STREAMS THROUGH BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER

On March 20, 1996 the Agency heads of the USDI Bureau of Land Management and the USDA Forest Service signed a letter agreeing to aggressively implement a cooperative management strategy to accelerate the restoration and improved management of riparian-wetland- areas in the western United States. The USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service is a principal partner in this strategy. The March 20 letter identified the approach to restoration as one of collaboration:

“[Restoration] will not happen by regulation, changes in the law, more money, or any of the normal bureaucratic approaches. It will only occur through the integration of ecological, economic, and social factors, and participation of affected interests.”

The National Riparian Service Team (NRST) and an extended riparian coordination network were created in order to focus efforts on this strategy of cooperative riparian restoration.

Riparian areas are the areas where land and water meet along stream and lake margins. Wetlands are areas such as swamps or marshes that remain saturated most of the year. Riparian and wetland areas make up a small percentage of total land area but are essential for maintaining water quality and quantity, for ground water recharge, and for dissipating stream energy. Riparian-wetland areas also provide tremendous community benefits in the form of wildlife, grazing, recreation, fisheries and other beneficial uses. Riparian and wetland areas are also indicators of watershed health, as they are among the first landscape features to reflect damage from improper management or natural events within the watershed.

Goal: ACHIEVING RIPARIAN RESTORATION THROUGH COLLABORATION

There is growing agreement among people in the western United States as to the value and desirability of healthy streams and lakes and the need to accelerate restoration of degraded areas. Considerable disagreement exists among people however, about the existing conditions of riparian-wetland areas, about the types of uses that are appropriate, and about the treatments and tools that can be successfully employed to restore or maintain healthy riparian-wetland areas. Strongly held values and interests create polarity among user groups and interested people which is a major barrier to achieving healthy streams.

The ability to accomplish the program of accelerating cooperative riparian and wetland restoration is dependent upon being able to bring communities of people together using a common vocabulary and definitions for evaluating the health and condition of riparian-wetland areas. Management and problem resolution is most effective at the ground level, employing a system which allows people to reach agreement about the specific physical functions of riparian-wetland systems. Resulting management decisions must engage the people most affected by success or failure.

Goal: REDUCING PROCESS

Given the many laws, regulations, and policies which exist to protect and enhance riparian-wetland areas, efforts at restoration and maintenance of health are often lost in process requirements. *Red tape* is a problem which is frequently cited as a barrier to effective, efficient restoration. To facilitate the goal of accelerating restoration, the program is intended to demonstrate ways of complying with pertinent laws in a more efficient manner. Working collaboratively with the scope of interested parties offers one of the greatest opportunities for reducing process. There are also many technical and procedural changes which may enhance efficiency. The NRST and the riparian coordination network will be working to encourage and implement these changes, where appropriate.

The Foundation Tool: PROPER FUNCTIONING CONDITION

Proper functioning condition (PFC) is an assessment tool which has been developed in cooperation with many individuals, interest groups, and state and federal agencies. It provides the common language and communication tool that invites participation from the widest group of affected interests, both inside and outside government to help “fix the creeks.” PFC is a qualitative approach supported by quantitative science.

Use of this assessment is a critical first step requiring people to put aside “values” and focus on the physical function of riparian-wetland areas. A properly functioning system is a resilient system, able to provide a variety of values (e.g., livestock forage, wildlife habitat). A system that is not functioning properly is vulnerable to a 25 to 30 year event and decisions are only relevant until that event occurs. The decision space about values *begins* with a system at properly functioning condition and from there a number of desirable outcomes are possible.

The PFC process also describes a logical planning sequence to achieve desired restoration objectives, beginning with the assessment. Additional steps include analysis of cause and effect where condition is less than proper functioning, management actions to achieve and maintain a state of proper functioning condition, monitoring of the actions, and evaluation of results as feedback to further management actions.

NRST and the Riparian Coordination Network

