

Allowing Grazing and Protecting Riparian Areas

Sustainable Agriculture Fact Sheet

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Need: Environmentally sustainable grazing near streams

Commodity: Beef Cattle

States: All Western states

Background: Grazing livestock seek out water, vegetation and shade that are available in riparian areas and tend to congregate around water. Environmental organizations and other interested parties have claimed that traditional livestock grazing in riparian areas on Western rangelands is unsustainable.

The Problem: When too many cattle are allowed to congregate in a riparian area, they can over-graze the area and cause obvious damage to the river or stream that impacts wildlife, including threatened and endangered species. What ranchers, scientists and environmentalists didn't know – and therefore argued about – was if ecologically sustainable grazing was possible and economically feasible

The Research: University of California Rangeland Watershed Specialist Kenneth Tate had done earlier SARE-funded research that showed active rancher management was positively associated with stream health. This project was developed to confirm these results, and to determine realistic, site-specific expectations for rangeland riparian health. The objectives were to:

- Confirm the potential for site-specific grazing-management practices to enhance important riparian health metrics, clearly documenting the potential for sustainable riparian grazing.
- Develop a protocol to establish achievable, site-specific expectations for riparian health, which provides grazing managers with clear targets.
- Extend the riparian grazing management recommendations developed from this work to private and public-land grazing managers, as well as to regulatory and natural resources agencies.

About three dozen ranchers and numerous agencies participated in the project to survey grazing management and across California grazed and non-grazed meadow streams. The study represents about one million acres of mountain grazing land and approximately 11,000 head of beef cattle.

The Impact: The key finding was that ranchers and land managers can protect riparian health through traditional livestock-management practices, particularly cattle-distribution efforts. Stream protection didn't require high-cost infrastructure but consistent, adequate effort by ranchers to control the timing and intensity of livestock use on meadow streams. The project also demonstrated the benefit of cooperation between land managers and applied scientists to conduct research at the management scale.

The Challenges Ahead: Tate's research showed that sustainable grazing in riparian areas – and cooperation between ranchers, land managers and environmental organizations – is possible, but future conflicts are likely. Having neutral, fact-driven researchers to seek mutually satisfactory solutions to those conflicts – as was the case here – is critical.

Links:

Feature article: <http://www.westernsare.org/Learning-Center/From-the-Field/Confirmation-of-Riparian-Friendly-Grazing-Project-Results-and-Development-of-Achievable-Site-Specific-Reference-Conditions-for-Grazed-Riparian-Areas>

Project report: https://projects.sare.org/sare_project/SW03-037/;

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