

Selling a Successful Riparian Management Program: a Public Land Manager's Viewpoint

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Abstract.—Management of riparian areas is a key issue facing land managers today. A major challenge for the manager is selling an effective riparian area management program to public land users, interest groups, and private landowners whose holdings are intermingled with public lands throughout the west. A successful program developed in central Oregon during the past 10 years is based upon six major steps: (1) identifying benefits derived from proper riparian management (clean water, more uniform stream flows, less soil erosion, increased livestock forage, and improved wildlife habitat), (2) having access to an "on-the-ground" recovered riparian area accomplished through grazing management, (3) bringing "key players" (affected landowners and permittees, interest group members, agency personnel, and public land managers) together "on-the-ground" to agree on goals, alternatives, and a plan of action, (4) closely monitoring progress in reaching goals, (5) keeping all parties involved and communicating, (6) remaining flexible to changes needed to make the program work. In summary, a strong coalition of land users, landowners, and managers working together on commonly identified goals is the key to selling a successful riparian management program.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss what I feel are the keys to selling a successful riparian area management program, not the technical or scientific keys, but the human relations keys. Much has been, and will continue to be, spoken and written about management strategies, grazing systems, and livestock exclusion to improve riparian ecosystems. However I feel professionals in the natural resources management field have not adequately addressed the most important factor of all, how to work with people (ranchers, wildlife advocates, environmentalists, public land managers and others concerned with proper resource management) to initiate and implement (or, as I prefer to call it, "sell") successful riparian management programs.

The U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in Oregon and Washington has been acknowledged as a leader in the riparian management field. The Prineville BLM District has been working actively for over 10 years to implement a process of improving public land riparian zones and the associated uplands. Although there is still a large job ahead, the District currently has over 50% of over 650 km of perennial streams in an improving condition.

Several perennial streams in central Oregon have been changed from wide, shallow, algae filled waters to clean, clear, productive streams supporting significant trout populations in 10 years or less. New perennial streams have been created in areas where none has existed for the past 60 to 80 years or longer. Much of this improvement has been accomplished with properly managed livestock grazing.

There are riparian zones in the Prineville BLM District where livestock grazing is not appropriate, such as Camp Creek, with its steep banks and highly erodible soils. However, I feel the vast majority of riparian zones can be significantly improved with properly managed livestock grazing.

Studies have shown that riparian areas can generally be improved by livestock exclusion. However, in my view, riparian exclusion fencing is an unnecessary and expensive alternative that is neither realistic or practical over most of the West. Corridor fencing that protects only the riparian zone also ignores associated uplands, which are crucial to successful management of the watershed.

Studies have documented that most riparian zones can be significantly improved under properly managed grazing. The question is, how to initiate and implement, or more

appropriately "sell", a program? The Prineville District staff has identified six key steps involved in "selling" a successful program:

- (1.) Identifying benefits or products derived from proper riparian management (clear water, more uniform stream flows, less soil erosion, increased livestock forage, and improved wildlife habitat),
- (2.) Having year long access to an "on-the-ground" recovered riparian area that was accomplished with grazing management,
- (3.) Bringing key "players" (affected landowners and permittees, interest group members, other agency personnel, and public land managers) together "on-the-ground" to observe the recovered area and to agree on goals, alternatives, and a plan of action for other areas,
- (4.) Closely monitoring progress in reaching goals,
- (5.) Keeping all parties involved and communicating, and
- (6.) Remaining flexible to changes needed to make the program work.

There are undoubtedly other successful management programs, but this is one that has worked for BLM in Prineville. The above steps are listed in the approximate order that we feel they should be implemented. However, there is considerable overlap between most steps and flexibility is essential to successful program implementation.

Identify Riparian Zone Benefits or Products

The first step to "sell" a program is to "identify benefits or products derived from proper riparian management." Riparian zones mean different things to different people. It is essential that the end products of proper riparian management, whether they be economic or aesthetic in nature, are clearly defined.

For many years natural resource managers and scientists tied riparian zone improvement to wildlife because they recognized the benefits of the riparian areas to most species of wildlife and fish. The wildlife and fisheries biologists were among the first champions of improved riparian zones in BLM and other land managing agencies. However, the biologist, the range conservationists, or the manager more often than not encountered serious resistance when trying to sell improved riparian management to ranchers based upon the benefits to fish and wildlife. Most ranchers, although they enjoy seeing wildlife on the land,

could see no direct economic benefits from the fish and wildlife; few saw benefits for them in an improved riparian zone. However, improved stream flow, more forage, and reduced soil erosion is another matter. Show a rancher how he or she can have longer periods of stream flow, improved water quality, increased forage production, and reduced erosion of valuable bottom lands, and you significantly increase the odds of that rancher adopting the program.

The land managers in the Prineville District began many years ago selling the riparian area management program to ranchers based upon how it could benefit them, not how it would benefit the angler, hunter, or bird watcher, and it has worked! If riparian area management programs are to be successfully sold to public land users, whether they are ranchers or conservationists, the first job of the land manager is to identify the benefits important to that land user. If this step is done, the "selling" job is greatly simplified. However, if it is not done, the program will be much more difficult to successfully implement and is probably doomed to failure.

Although this essential first step of selling the program based upon benefits to the "buyer" sounds simple, it is not! There are, and always will be, doubters and skeptics who will say "I don't believe the program will provide the benefits you claim." This is the point where the second step of "Having year long access to an 'on-the-ground' recovered riparian zone accomplished through grazing management" becomes important.

Have Access to An Improved Riparian Zone

There is nothing more effective in selling riparian management than an area where the benefits and products of proper riparian management (improved stream flow, clean water, increased forage production, and improved wildlife habitat) can be seen, walked upon, touched, and discussed. A demonstration riparian area, improved through grazing management, can do more to "sell" a program than all the rhetoric a land manager can ever deliver to the land users. Location and access to the demonstration area are very important considerations. If there is not a local riparian area improved through grazing management, an area in another region or state may be used. However the local area is always more effective as it will reduce the skepticism that "management may work here, but it won't work in my area." Year long access is also very important for observation of riparian zone functions throughout the year and their relationship to management strategies.

A very important point in the step is to distinguish between demonstration, or "show me", areas accomplished with and without grazing. "No grazing or total exclusion areas" will not sell a riparian area management program to most ranchers, because almost everyone agrees livestock exclusion works for the riparian zone. The exclusion area will provide most benefits, but it is not useful to convince those you need to sell the most. However, riparian exclusion areas adjacent to grazing management areas are good reference points, and they can help to sell properly managed grazing for duplicating natural riparian recovery.

The establishment of grazing management practices that lead to improved riparian zones has, in the past, been to a large degree a process of trial and error. However, with our current knowledge of riparian ecosystems and the physical processes basic to all streams, we are able to accurately predict the success of most management practices prior to field implementation.

Bring "Key Players" Together "On-the-Ground"

It is not absolutely essential that a recovered area be located in the same area where you are attempting to begin a riparian area improvement program. However, having an area in the vicinity helps because it is much easier to move to the third key step to success of "Bringing the 'key players' (affected landowners and grazing permittees, interest group members, other agency personnel, and public land managers) together 'on-the-ground' to observe what can happen and to agree on goals, alternatives, and a plan of action for riparian area management on other areas."

This is an essential step that cannot be eliminated or downplayed in importance. Many programs have failed or been less than fully successful primarily because each of the affected groups has not viewed successful "on-the-ground" management programs and group members have not had the opportunity to interact with the other players. Some feel that this step can be done in an office or classroom, but it is much more effective done on the land while viewing a success story.

Often it is difficult to get different interest group members "on-the-ground" together, but it is essential to successful completion of this step in the process. Only when each of the various interests is represented, is true progress made. An excellent example of such interaction has been demonstrated by the Oregon Watershed Improvement Coalition, a group comprised of leaders from the livestock and forest products industries and several major conservation organizations in Oregon, under sponsorship of the Society for Range Management. This group is pioneering cooperation in watershed management throughout Oregon and is an organization you will undoubtedly hear much more from in the future.

Although some riparian management discussions will involve only the land manager and the rancher, it is essential to the long term success of a program to have the wildlife advocate, environmentalist, and other interested parties involved in the process. Experience has shown that a tremendous amount of synergism occurs from field sessions where all parties are involved. When all are involved, each individual is better able to see and understand the others' viewpoints regarding riparian management and better relate to other land management philosophies. Successful riparian area management programs undoubtedly have been implemented without all interested parties being involved, but the chances of success are much higher with what we call "integrated involvement."

The step of bringing all major interested parties together to discuss and agree on goals, alternatives, and plan of action is a major step and should not be attempted in one session. People need time after an initial meeting to think about what they have seen, heard, and discussed. Many times the participants are far apart (or perceive that they are) in thought processes and philosophies about riparian management. It takes time to sort out exactly where each stands on the riparian issue. Therefore, it is strongly suggested that a series of meetings be planned over a period of months to give those involved adequate time to absorb information and review the alternative. It may take several trips to a successfully managed riparian area for the "key players" to begin to see what has occurred and to integrate the results into their expectations and a proposed plan.

A brief word about goals and alternatives. It is essential that goals be established and well understood by all participants. There would be nothing more frustrating, and possibly fatal, to a program than to learn far down the implementation path that goals were not clearly understood in the beginning. The participants will have different initial goals. For example, the rancher may desire more permanent livestock water, reduced bank erosion, and increased forage production from the riparian zone and the wildlife advocate will likely desire improved habitat for wildlife, greater fish production, cleaner water, and reduced erosion. These goals must be identified and tied to improved ecological condition of the riparian area, an overall goal that can be supported by all participants.

It is also important to explore alternative solutions to resolve land management problems. There are usually several alternatives available and having more than one option improves the chances of finding a solution that is acceptable to the participants.

Monitor Progress

A fourth major step to successful riparian management is to "monitor progress in reaching established goals." All individuals involved in any facet of land management (ranchers, government representatives, or interest group members) know that we must not only develop and implement sound programs, but we must carefully evaluate what is happening on the land and what changes may be necessary to ensure the overall success of a program. It is no different with riparian management. We must monitor progress in reaching the previously established goals for the area.

Successful monitoring begins with establishment of baseline or current resource conditions followed by periodic re-evaluation of the area to compare where we are today with where we were when the program began. This may include a variety of methods to measure vegetation, soil, macroinvertebrates, wildlife and fish populations, water quality and quantity, and other possibly important environmental parameters. I will not discuss specific methods; however, I do want to emphasize one monitoring technique which, in my opinion, is mandatory. The method is permanent photo points along the riparian zone.

General view photographs, taken at permanently marked points, are probably the single most valuable monitoring tool that can be employed to document riparian habitat changes. Photos are quick, easy, and almost fool proof with modern cameras. They can be of more value to document change and to help sell future riparian management programs than any other tool you can employ. Although one must carefully interpret photos, they can and do show dramatic results on improving riparian zones. Photos can be used in presentations, published in journals, magazines, and brochures, and kept in permanent files to document change and to show those who cannot personally visit improved riparian areas the results that can and do occur under improved management.

I suggest, as a minimum, that permanent photo points be established at approximately 400-m intervals on all stream riparian zones. If at all possible, the photo points should be established prior to implementation of improved management programs to show both the before and after story. The 400-m rule is a minimum, and more frequent points can be employed, if desired. Photo points should also be established around lakes, ponds, and reservoirs to show changes.

Involvement and Open Communication

"Continued involvement and open communication" are certainly keys to implementation of successful riparian management programs. Once a program is agreed to and implemented, one cannot assume that the game is over and the riparian zone has won. There are plenty of pitfalls along the road to riparian area recovery. A lack of continued involvement or poor communication among the "key players" is a major obstacle that must be recognized and dealt with if and when it surfaces.

If an improvement program is to be a long term success, those who develop and implement the program must stay involved as it is implemented. Periodic field trips to the area as the riparian zone is recovering are very valuable to all involved parties and will help to maintain interest because something new is observed on almost every trip. Riparian zone recovery is a long term and dynamic ecological succession process. There are always new and exciting events or changes occurring, such as the June 1987 flood event on the Bear Creek riparian management area, south of Prineville. This flood, which caused considerable watershed and property damage outside the improved riparian zone, deposited significant amounts of sediment and resulted in very positive bank building in the area currently under intensive grazing management. Changes such as these must be documented, evaluated, and considered in the overall management plan for the area. We are just beginning to fully understand riparian zone management, and continued involvement by all parties is essential to long-term success.

Maintain Flexibility

"Flexibility" is the last key step to successful riparian area management. All riparian management programs will require some changes to be successful. If a plan is well conceived and implemented, the changes may be minor. Participants should not look upon change as something bad or a sign of failure but should view required changes as a positive part of dynamic riparian management. We still have a tremendous amount to learn about riparian management, and many times we have to experiment to find the best solutions.

The key to managing change in riparian management programs is to maintain flexibility and do not be afraid to try something new if what has previously been tried is not working or meeting management objectives. Prior to making changes, the reason for the change should be thoroughly discussed with all key participants. Thorough discussion improves trust among group members and generally results in identification of the best alternative solutions to the problem at hand.

Summary

I have listed what we in the Prineville BLM organization believe to be six essential key steps to implementing a successful riparian management program. We have used them, and they have worked for us. They are presented to provide to others involved in natural resource management ideas on how to initiate and successfully implement management programs, both in riparian zones and other lands under our stewardship.

The development of a strong coalition of land users, landowners, and managers working together to reach common goals, monitoring results of management actions and keeping communication lines open, are the keys to "selling" and implementing a successful riparian management program. This process leads to a program where everyone comes out a winner, including the riparian zones.