

Position Paper:

A Riparian Policy for Changing Times¹

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Abstract.--The Forest Service recognizes the importance and unique values of riparian ecosystems, and the increasing public awareness of these values. Policy directions, to be issued shortly, state that these lands on the National Forest System will be managed for their unique values, following the principles of multiple use and sustained yield, and meeting stewardship responsibilities for protecting soil, water, and vegetative resources.

"The times change and we change with them." This was said more than a thousand years ago by a Roman emperor. And yet I can think of no better motto for managing natural resources, especially the public lands. The resources themselves are constantly changing, evolving. But, more importantly, our use of those resources changes, and with this, the value of a particular resource, in human terms, grows or diminishes. Part of this shifting of values may be simply recognizing the true worth of a resource, or the fact that it is becoming scarcer. In the past, that "worth" often revolved around changing commodity needs. Today, I'm glad to be able to say that the "worth" of a resource depends as well on its intrinsic value in the natural cycle, its unique or fragile qualities, and the recognition--finally--that human beings have an obligation to pass on to future generations a land base that is both productive and diverse.

This is certainly true of the riparian ecosystems. Today, the public recognizes the value--and the fragile nature--of these lands.

Yet it was only a few years ago that scientists recognized the riparian ecosystem as one of the richest zones for fauna. And it was just a year and a half ago that the Forest Service initiated the first symposium on the "Importance, Preservation and Management of Riparian Habitat."

The Forest Service, as a public land managing agency, is responding to this growing public awareness of the riparian ecosystems' value, and making sure that these values are given appropriate play in our management of the National Forests and Grasslands. Likewise, we recognize that people still want the commodity values that riparian ecosystems offer so abundantly.

Resource policy and management must be dynamic--this is fundamental. Since the beginning, Forest Service management has evolved to meet changing needs, concerns, and values, and new scientific knowledge. It has become very evident in recent times that there is considerable concern for the riparian ecosystems. Therefore, our decision was easy--we had to update our riparian policy and management, if needed; stay in tune with public sentiment on managing these lands; and make sure we were moving in the best direction.

Last July, I established a Task Force to examine current streamside-riparian area management on the National Forests and Grasslands. The mission was explicit--determine if the existing national policy needs changing, and if management strategies are adequate to ensure that riparian values are recognized and balanced in National Forest System management.

Now the results are in--and we found that our basic policy on riparian management is sound. But we want to go beyond merely a re-affirmation of policy. We want to ensure that the letter, intent, and philosophy of this policy are evident wherever a riparian ecosystem exists on the National Forest System. The four main principles of the policy are:

1. We will plan for and manage riparian ecosystems with full recognition of their importance and unique values.

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2. At the same time, we will manage riparian ecosystems as an integral component of the adjacent lands, under the principles of multiple use and sustained yield.

3. We will protect, and, where applicable, improve the riparian ecosystems--that is, the soil, water, and vegetation--as one of our basic stewardship responsibilities. This will be done prior to, or in conjunction with, other resource allocation decisions.

4. We will also, as policy, continue research programs on the management, ecology, and protection of riparian environments for water, fish, wildlife, timber, livestock, and recreation values and uses.

But, policy is one thing. Interpretation, and action on the ground, can be another. You know this, and I know it. So, let me explain how this policy will be--and I emphasize will be--integrated into National Forest land management planning. I'll start with the policy directions that will be issued shortly:

---Riparian management will encompass the requirements of Executive Order 11990 for wetlands and Executive Order 11988 for floodplains, particularly the requirements to avoid, to the extent possible, adverse impacts from activities on the riparian ecosystem.

---Public participation in all our planning and management--including that for riparian ecosystems--is assured through the National Forest Management Act.

---Land management plans will specifically state objectives for riparian ecosystems.

---We expect to classify riparian ecosystems in the Forest Service National Land Classification System that we use in land management planning. Riparian ecosystems and associated lands will be inventoried and delineated as "Capability Areas" on the National Forest System.

---Interdisciplinary teams will identify alternatives for protecting and managing riparian ecosystems as planning is done on each Forest or Grassland.

---Our land managers will use environmental assessments to evaluate both the individual and cumulative effects of proposed actions in riparian ecosystems. This will ensure that the natural and beneficial values of these ecosystems are protected as the President has directed.

---The actual on-the-ground effects of our actions within and adjacent to riparian ecosystems will be monitored and evaluated, keeping in mind the considerable expense associated with monitoring.

---Riparian ecosystems planning and management on the National Forest System will be coordinated with other Federal agencies, the States, and local governments.

In many cases, various aspects of this policy direction have been on-the-ground reality. But, I'll be very frank and say that the success of our riparian ecosystem management varies from forest to forest. This results from the diversity of ecosystems throughout the National Forest System, as well as the intense competition for the resources these ecosystems have to offer. Our national policy provides the flexibility necessary for considering each local situation.

We have the manpower, experience, and expertise already within the Forest Service to make sure that this policy is extended throughout the National Forest System.

We also recognize that research is the key to solving many of the present conflicts. When the Task Force was set up, we began to look at research needs as well. Our goal is ambitious--we want to have, by 1985, information needed for evaluating the suitability and capability of riparian ecosystems and analyzing resource trade-offs in the West.

I spoke earlier of changing times. And, we are indeed living in an era of tremendously rapid change. A number of events--changes, if you will--have occurred in the last few years to create the most favorable climate ever in which to live up to the letter of the riparian policy I've described. Under the Resources Planning Act of 1974, and the National Forest Management Act of 1976, the Forest Service has the means of tying resource goals to land capability and protection, and public needs. Just as importantly, the land management planning process which we are now refining through regulations is built on what I consider the two best foundation stones for land management in the public interest. They are: interdisciplinary planning and intensive public involvement.

We want to practice sound land stewardship by protecting the soil, water, and vegetative resources. The National Forest Management Act supports the concept that this fundamental need be recognized prior to, or in conjunction with, resource allocations.

In looking at the riparian ecosystems, the Task Force found that conflicts among uses are often most pronounced on these lands, and are most evident in arid regions where riparian ecosystems are scarce. In addition, we need more information about these lands. Scientists disagree even on the basic characteristics and capabilities of riparian ecosystems. And, as perhaps the inevitable result of rapid change over a short period of time, we now find that recent legislation, regulations, and Executive Orders overlap, so that roles of various agencies do not emerge in sharp and precise focus.

The inherent conflicts were obvious--particularly in the West, where competition for available water is a way of life, for humans and resources as well.

It came as no surprise that livestock grazing has the greatest single impact on riparian areas in the Southwest and intermountain areas. We found examples of quality streamside management co-existing with livestock grazing. And yet, we heard increasing concern that livestock grazing may be depleting the riparian conditions and fish habitat.

In most areas, the adverse impacts of timber harvesting and road construction--which were evident in the past--have largely been mitigated by better management, including specific provisions in timber sales contracts. But, concerns are still voiced in the Pacific Northwest and Alaska, where high timber values compete with high anadromous fish values.

Another sign of our times is the increase in water-oriented recreation, which affects riparian ecosystems, particularly in the East.

And, dispersed recreation was cited as harrassing wildlife and degrading habitat in unique southwestern riparian ecosystems.

Other activities which were brought out as areas of concern included: public highway construction and maintenance on National Forests, placer and hydraulic mining, removal of stream-deposited gravel, and pollutants originating from mining outside the riparian ecosystem itself.

This is perhaps the grim side of the picture--the conflict side. Now, let me focus on the brighter side--the success stories in our efforts to balance a variety of uses with protection of the riparian ecosystems. The value of these successes extends far beyond the land area they initially influence--we see in them methods that can be applied in other areas to address the conflicts found by the Task Force.

In Eastern Oregon, we've set objectives for our riparian habitat and have incorporated them into rotational grazing systems, as well as considering the impacts of all resource use. This has produced very positive improvements in the ecosystem over the past four years.

In coastal Alaska, we are determining ecological principles and developing management practices necessary to maintain fish habitats, meet water quality standards, and reach timber production goals.

In the Pacific Northwest, we are trying to determine the importance of streamside vegetation for maintaining anadromous fish habitat, and are developing methods for identifying highly productive streams. We hope to establish the importance of cover density along streamsidess, the contribution of terrestrial insects from streamside vegetation, and the interaction between grazing and this vegetation.

We want to find the best ways of managing resource use within riparian areas. As an example, researchers in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan are developing management guidelines for almost 100,000 acres (40,000 hectares) of wildlife impoundments to provide habitat for waterfowl, furbearers, reptiles, and amphibians, as well as enhancing landscape diversity and recreational opportunities.

I said earlier that the times change and we change with them. I think some of these examples illustrate the magnitude of that change. I've also heard that "the only constant on this earth is change." I want to emphasize that Forest Service policy and management are not fixed or static. They, too, will continue to change and evolve, responding to both the resource and public sentiment. This is the only way in which we can truly recognize the values of the riparian ecosystems, in both ecological and human terms.