GRAZING Strategies

Decreasing the number of livestock is commonly offered as the simple solution to degraded riparian conditions. But even under light stocking rates livestock tend to concentrate on riparian vegetation during various seasons of the year. Unless the reduction were extreme, it might not achieve the desired improvement in riparian conditions. This is especially likely if the riparian area is in a deteriorated condition with slow recovery potential.

In short, restoring degraded riparian areas generally requires managers to change the way livestock are grazed.

A successful riparian grazing strategy will fit the unique circumstances of each site, including watershed and stream conditions, riparian and upland vegetation, terrain, class or kind of livestock, and the management capability and objectives of the livestock operator.

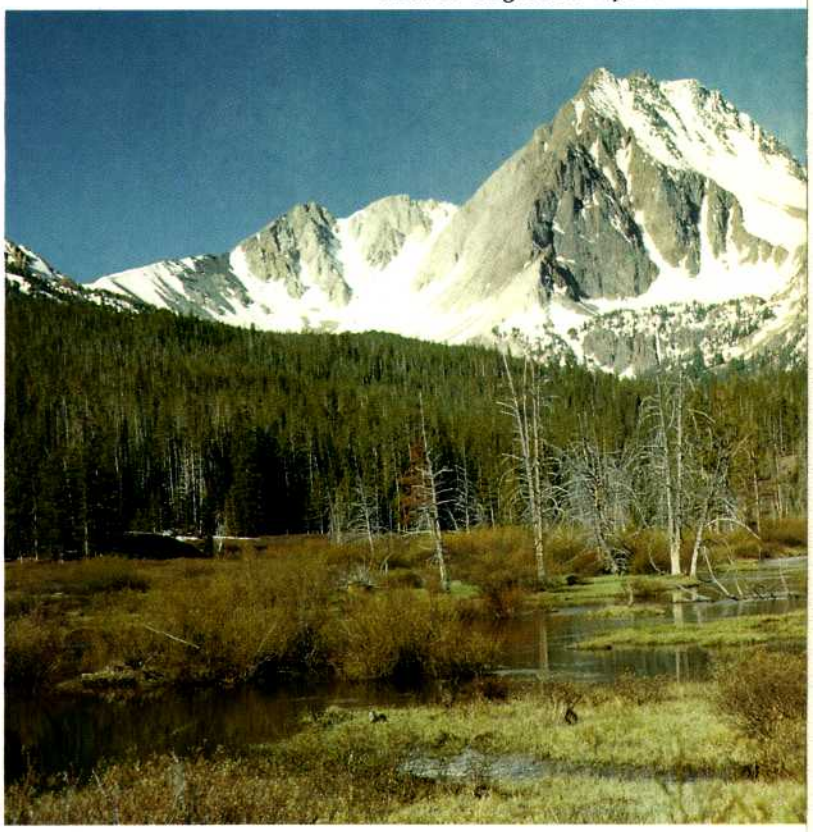
These circumstances occur in virtually infinite variation across the West. No one grazing strategy will fit all situations. The most promising strategies for protecting or restoring riparian areas incorporate one or more of the following features:

- **Including the riparian area within a separate pasture with separate management objectives and strategies.**
- **Fencing or herding livestock out of riparian areas for as long as necessary to allow vegetation and streambanks to recover.**
- **Controlling the timing of grazing to: (a) keep livestock off streambanks when they are most vulnerable to damage; and (b) coincide with the physiological needs of target plant species.**
- **Adding more rest to the grazing cycle to increase plant vigor, allow streambanks to heal, or encourage more desirable plant species composition.**
- **Limiting grazing intensity to a level which will maintain desired species composition and vigor.**
- **Changing from cattle to sheep to obtain better animal distribution through herding.**
- **Permanently excluding livestock from riparian areas at high risk and with poor recovery potential when there is no practical way to protect them while grazing adjacent uplands.**

RESTORING *and protecting riparian areas is a long-term job requiring a long-term commitment.*

TIME

The deterioration of western riparian areas and associated uplands didn't happen overnight. In many areas the process began more than a century ago. In many areas it is continuing, despite reported improving trends in upland conditions.



Loss of topsoil and the gullies and arroyos resulting from improper land management for all practical purposes have permanently altered and diminished the productivity of large areas.

On high gradient streams where the channel is unstable, or where seed sources for native riparian plants are absent or in short supply, or where sediment loads are low, recovery may take decades.

In areas with shallow soils and where streams carry limited sediment to rebuild streambanks, it might take centuries to restore productive riparian areas.

In high elevation glaciated stream basins with little soil building potential, and in some areas where stream channels are severely downcut, restoration of degraded riparian areas probably won't occur until the passing of another ice or volcanic age.

However, as the preceding case studies demonstrate, many riparian sites have potential for dramatic recovery.

Even severely degraded riparian areas can be restored when site conditions and management are right. For example, on low gradient streams flowing through alluvial valley bottoms, particularly where the stream carries a large sediment load at high