THE nation's wetlands include a wide variety of coastal and inland marshes, prairie potholes, bogs, swamps, river bottomlands and riparian areas, springs and seeps. Together they comprise less than 5% of the land area in the coterminous forty-eight states. But wetlands increasingly are recognized as among the nation's most productive, valuable and threatened natural resources.

Wetlands perform many functions and produce many products of significant social and economic value. Wetland vegetation protects shorelines and streambanks from erosion, slows flood flows, filters out sediment, captures and breaks down nutrients and water pollutants.

Wetlands can store, cleanse and slowly release water, thereby extending the supply and quality of water for agricultural, industrial, municipal, hydroelectric and recreational uses. Wetlands play critical roles in the life cycle of many commercially, recreationally and esthetically important fish and wildlife species.

Most riparian ecosystems — streams and adjacent land they strongly influence — contain wetlands. The Clean Water Act provides jurisdictional wetlands regulatory protection from discharges of dredged or fill materials and other pollutants. Non-wetland portions of riparian areas are outside the regulatory protection of the Act.

Best Management Practices (BMPs) developed pursuant to the nonpoint source provisions of the Clean Water Act provide a mechanism for protecting non-wetland riparian values, and provide additional protection for wetlands.

During the past decade growing national and international attention has been directed to protecting and restoring wetlands.

This document focuses on the effects of improper and improved livestock grazing on stream corridor riparian/wetland areas. Many of the problems and opportunities also apply to lake, pothole, marsh and spring/seep wetlands.

A followup technical field manual will address strategies for protecting and restoring both riparian and wetland values through improved grazing management.

Improper grazing can seriously reduce wetland values.

Proper grazing management can protect or restore productive wetland vegetation.