Program Partners

- Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada
- Ducks Unlimited Canada
- Environment Canada
- Fisheries and Oceans Canada
- Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Initiatives
- Manitoba Cattle Producers Association
- Manitoba Conservation
- Manitoba Habitat Heritage Corporation
- Manitoba Water Stewardship

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This and other related material, including a stocking rate calculator, an aerial photo library and other pasture management tools, can be found at www.riparianhealth.ca

MANAGING THE WATER'S EDGE
A Land & Water Partnership

Riparian Grazing Strategies

Riparian Grazing Plans

(One of a series)

Management Options - Grazing Systems

A managed grazing system will enhance livestock production and maintain or improve the plant community in the riparian area.

Rotational grazing

In a rotational grazing system, larger pastures are divided into smaller paddocks and each is grazed according to an overall plan. Although creation of a rotational grazing system may require investment in fences and alternate water sites, forage production and management flexibility are enhanced. The timing and intensity of grazing in the riparian area can be controlled.

When grazing is concentrated on a small area for a short period of time – often just a few days – the animals use the whole pasture more evenly. Grazing is less selective and results in a more efficient use of all the forages present, especially in riparian areas. Each paddock of the pasture is rested at some time during the growing season, allowing plants to rebuild energy reserves and root systems.

Riparian pasture system

In a riparian pasture system, pastures are separated into units based on a land type or on a landscape basis. For example, tame pasture is fenced separate from native pasture, riparian areas are fenced separate from upland areas.

In this system, livestock distribution in both riparian areas and uplands can be more easily controlled, which may allow for increased carrying capacity. In addition, there is more control over livestock grazing during high-risk periods, which can help recovery of riparian health and productivity.

Fencing a riparian area into a corridor and providing a long rest period can be useful in some situations, especially when streambanks are highly susceptible to damage because of soil texture, topography or continually saturated soils. Fencing out the riparian area may also be advantageous where objectives such as improved water quality are a priority. Corridor fencing is not usually the preferred choice for riparian pasture management, but when other management options have failed to restore riparian health, it may be the best alternative.

Other pasture systems

Although creating separate riparian pastures can fit well into a rotational grazing system, dividing pastures this way is not the only option. Large pastures that include riparian areas can be divided so that riparian areas are present in all paddocks. In these areas, fences generally run across creeks or streams, and uplands are included with the riparian areas. In this case, the riparian area is the benchmark for the management of the paddock. This practice is common where the entire pasture is located within a valley and the creation of a separate riparian pasture would result in a narrow corridor along the stream.

It is important that the stocking rate is based on the area that the livestock actually use, that there is sufficient time for re-growth to occur after the grazing period, and adequate carry-over of forage exists along the riparian areas.

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Benefits of grazing management plans that take riparian areas into account include:

- Improved animal performance and reduced incidence of disease.
- Increased forage production in the riparian zone.
- Enhanced shelter for cattle and habitat for wildlife.
- Reduced bank erosion, increased stability of shorelines and less sediment in the water.
- Reduced risk of water contamination by manure.
- Water management provides a measure of drought proofing.

A grazing plan can improve or maintain forage production and optimize animal performance. Planning can help identify potential problems and provide ways to avoid or solve those problems.

All grazing management requires an investment of time and money, but management changes don't have to be dramatic. They can be made incrementally over a number of years.

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