

MANAGING RIPARIAN LAND

Importance of riparian land

Riparian land is defined as:

the area of land that adjoins, regularly influences, or is influenced by, a river.

It can vary from a fairly narrow band in upland reaches of waterways to wide floodplains along lowland rivers, and in these lowland reaches includes the regularly wetted floodplain and associated wetlands.

Riparian land with intact vegetation is vitally important to the health of a waterway because it provides:

- organic matter to a river – a major food source for aquatic fauna;
- a supply of woody debris within the river, which forms key habitat areas for many fish and invertebrates;
- a source of shade in upland areas which influences water temperature and light penetration producing suitable conditions for aquatic flora and fauna; and
- assistance in bank stabilisation, reducing erosion in many areas.

The riparian land is a buffer between the catchment and the river so it can filter nutrients and sediment from catchment run-off and reduce the impacts of catchment land use on the river itself.

Intact riparian land is also an important part of the landscape because it:

- has a highly diverse flora and fauna;
- acts as a refuge in dry times and is an important source of food;
- is often the only reasonably healthy remnant of native vegetation in catchments which have been largely cleared; and
- can act as a wildlife corridor linking habitats, especially in cleared catchments.

Riparian zones are often important areas for recreation pursuits like bushwalking, fishing and picnicking, and often have sites of considerable heritage value, particularly to Indigenous communities.

Riparian and floodplain lands are also important for agriculture because they provide easy access to water and are often highly productive with better soils than the surrounding catchment.

The main issues

The major threats to riparian land include clearing, erosion, uncontrolled stock access, recreational use, weed invasion, stream crossings, removal of timber for firewood, salinity, and water management.

A 1999 statewide benchmarking report of stream condition showed that less than 10% of riparian land was in good to excellent condition, around 40% in reasonable to good condition, and over 50% in poor to very poor condition.

There are three issues that complicate the management of riparian land. These are:

- the mismatch between the ecological definition (described above) and administrative definitions of riparian land. Administrative definitions in the past have defined riparian land as a fixed width (generally between 20 and 60 m) alongside the river;
- the varying tenure of riparian land. Tenure can include:
 - Crown land water frontage reserves:
 - licensed, and
 - unlicensed;
 - Crown land reserved for other purposes, e.g. National or State Parks;
 - unreserved Crown land; and
 - privately owned land; and
- the dynamic nature of rivers.

Given these issues a management framework is required where all managers of riparian lands, both public and private, recognise the ecological importance and functions of that land and aim to manage their land in a way which protects and/or restores these functions for river health outcomes.

The VRHS aims to put in place a framework where all the current tools and incentives for managing riparian lands are aligned and aimed at achieving river health outcomes.

For riparian land the VRHS:

- Sets an overall direction for the management of all riparian land, regardless of tenure.
- Establishes a process for setting objectives, priorities and targets for restoration and protection of riparian land. These will be set through the regional river health and vegetation planning processes.
- Recognises that the successful management of riparian land can only occur where there is a clear partnership between the riparian land manager and Government.
- Establishes the CMAs as the 'caretakers' of riparian land, where their role is to be responsible for coordination of the required planning and implementation of programs for protection and restoration activities.
- Sets direction and guidance on a number of specific issues relating to environmental condition of riparian land, such as weed management and best management practice for riparian restoration.