

Riparian Notes

Note Number 16, March, 2006

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Progress, Setbacks and Interruptions

It is a universal truth that no matter how carefully you plan and orchestrate your activities, unforeseen interruptions will constantly be altering your plans. This reminds us to stay flexible and be resilient. Riparian Notes were originally intended to be produced and distributed on a monthly basis, but it has now been seven months since the last issue. Various interruptions, revised priorities, and crisis situations always seem to divert people in new and different directions, regardless of our plans.

The fact of life is that all people and all natural systems are constantly being subjected to unplanned and untimely interruptions, setbacks and changes of direction. We talk a lot about “the balance of nature”, but in reality we understand this is merely the ever-moving midpoint between the extremes. A relative degree of balance and stability can occur in our lives and in ecosystems, but there will always be ups and downs, sometimes violent ones.

The last Note was dated August, 2005, and the discussion now continues about the similarities between old pickup trucks and riparian areas. It is clear in both cases that progress toward the intended goal of restoration is often interrupted by various setbacks.

Significant progress had been made toward getting the 1950 Dodge pickup in some decent working condition. After spending many long, hot, sweaty, frustrating hours working on the truck, it was finally declared to be in working order. The truck was soon inspected, insured and registered. The driver was happy to finally be driving his new truck around. Never mind that it still *looked* like a piece of junk; it was functional. Functionality of creeks and trucks is not measured by aesthetic appearance.

But no sooner than success is proclaimed, setbacks will often occur. Before long, the brakes began to malfunction, the engine began to overheat, and the consumption of oil was excessive. It seemed that the truck-fixing project was going backward, not forward. Get the toolbox out and go back to work.

Such it is also, with creeks and riparian areas. Not only do disturbances occur, but they often hit in rapid succession or even simultaneously. The prolonged drought of 1998 – 2002 contributed to widespread degradation of water catchments, riparian areas and creeks. Normally flowing creeks dried up; 100+ year old pecan and elm trees died; erosion on uplands and riparian areas was accelerated. On many ranches, livestock numbers remained at pre-drought levels until the near the end when almost everyone in west Texas was forced to de-stock. Everything suffered: land, livestock wildlife, creeks, and people. Despite the prevailing drought conditions, several “50 year rainfall events” occurred on some water catchments during this period. Major bank failure occurred as well as massive movement of gravel and rock. Even some healthy riparian areas were stripped barren. The 1-2-3 punch of drought, heavy grazing and big storm events was overwhelming for many creeks.

Then, beginning in 2003, things started to improve. After a couple of favorable rainfall years, many of our creeks in west Texas seemed to be on the mend. Riparian water tables were rising and creeks began to flow once again. Colonizers such as spikerush and knotgrass began to reappear. Stabilizers such as switchgrass began to increase and old battered clumps of Emory sedge began to enlarge. Seedlings of buttonbush, little walnut, and sycamore could be found. Some vegetated riparian areas once again began to catch sediment and re-build floodplains. The energy of floodwater was being dissipated and erosion was less severe. Many ranchers were reluctant to fully re-stock. Pastures began to cover over once again with perennial grasses, slowing the runoff and stabilizing the soil. Things were definitely getting better.

Fast forward to March 2006. We once again find ourselves in a rainfall deficit. It has been the worst wildfire season in many years; the loss of life and property has been severe. Some of these burned water catchments have no visible ground cover and little or no soil moisture. In this world of land and water management, the only thing we know for sure is that we will experience both good times and bad times. The only advice that can be offered: be thankful for the good times and get ready for the bad times.