On the Edge

Riparian areas are the green, moist areas next to a lake, stream, or river where plants grow vigorously. In dry climates, where much BLM land is found, riparian areas are very important. The water itself and the plants alongside attract many different kinds of animals. The plants also help to prevent erosion, which occurs when soil washes into the water. A healthy riparian area helps keep the water clear and cool for fish and other aquatic animals.

A healthy riparian area

In many places in the West, riparian areas have been damaged. Trucks have been driven through streams, or roads have been built too close to the water. Logging and mining operations and other industrial activities have also been harmful to large areas surrounding streams. So have poor farming practices. In some places, too many cows or sheep grazed nearby. Other popular activities such as hiking, camping, boating, and biking have also weakened stream banks.

An unhealthy riparian area

All of these actions can destroy plants along the stream and cause stream banks to cave in. Erosion gets worse because there are fewer plants to hold the soil when it rains. The water becomes muddy. And it can get warmer, too, because there are no trees to shade the water. Warm, dirty water means trouble for native fish.

In many places, people are working to repair damaged riparian areas. They are planting trees along stream banks and moving roads away from the water's edge. They are building fences to control livestock grazing near streams. There's still plenty of work to do, but the water in many places is getting cleaner. And fish and wildlife are moving back into these riparian "ribbons of life."