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Fencing Out Streams Win-win for Livestock, Conservation

Streams and riparian areas play many important roles in pastures. They serve as water sources for livestock and wildlife and provide habitat for a multitude of species. When managed properly, riparian areas also lessen the impact of adjacent land uses by trapping sediment from eroding lands and absorbing nutrients from overland flow of water.



" Improved herd health results from development of alternative watering systems which give livestock access to clean water. "

Nonetheless, while streams and riparian zones offer many ecosystem services, they many times also exist in floodplains and make management of these areas a challenge. In addition, allowing grazing animals uncontrolled access to these sensitive places can have detrimental effects on both the water supply and ecosystem.

"Livestock trample the stream banks and bottom, dislodging soil," says Bobby

Whitescarver, a natural resource specialist from Swoope, VA. "This is absolutely deadly to the aquatic ecosystem as suspended sediment will clog the external gills of many aquatic macroinvertebrates, essentially suffocating them."

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In addition, Whitescarver notes, "Cattle defecate in the stream depositing nutrients and pathogens. Excessive nutrients are responsible for algae blooms and dead zones in water and pathogens pose a potential biosecurity risk for both livestock and humans downstream."

A more preferable solution, Whitescarver advises, is to implement riparian buffers along streams and limit or restrict

livestock's access, especially cattle, to susceptible waterways using fencing.

Through his 35 years of experience with both the Natural Resource Conservation Service and his private consulting business, Whitescarver Natural Resource Management, LLC, he has proven these methods effective and helped many livestock producers design and implement grazing systems that keep livestock out of streams and provide them with

alternative watering systems.

Some of the benefits from this practice producers can see Whitescarver points out are reduced calf mortality and improved herd health.

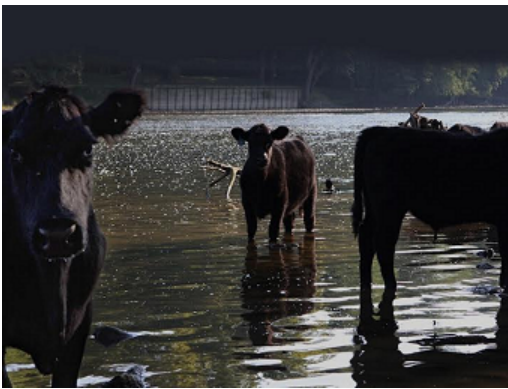
"Excluding livestock from riparian areas keeps them out of calving risk areas which are often steep, wet, and unforgiving to newborn calves," says Whitescarver. "Calves sometimes perish in these areas because they have a hard time getting their footing."



Improved herd health results from development of alternative watering systems which give livestock access to clean water. Whitescarver explains over half of the diseases of cattle in his region of the Mid-Atlantic States, are caused by the fecal-oral pathway. Cattle can pick up diseases such as leptospirosis, cryptosporidiosis, and even mastitis among many others from drinking and wallowing in streams.

Once a decision has been made to fence livestock out of waterways, Whitescarver recommends producers get started by contacting their [USDA](#) or [Soil and Water Conservation District](#) (SCWD) office. These entities administer numerous programs which are available to farmers and ranchers to assist, and in many cases cost-share, implementation of conservation projects which include riparian buffer and fencing projects, as well as watering systems development.

Minimum widths of buffer areas vary from as little as a 10 foot setback from streams to up to 100 feet. The higher the quality and size of the riparian area, the more reimbursement funds are available.



For example, says Whitescarver, "If you put up a single strand wire 10 feet off the stream, there's a different program that will pay you half of the cost, or they'll pay the material cost and that's all you get. But if you put in a 35 feet setback, install watering troughs, use rotational grazing, and plant trees in the buffer, you'll get a 140% reimbursement with rent."

Local experts at USDA and SCWD offices will be able to help

producers find out the details and specific requirements of programs available in their area.

When it comes to fencing for riparian areas, Whitescarver says, "The best kind of fencing is the kind that works for your livestock at the best value."

In non-floodplain areas, Whitescarver recommends producers put up the best fencing for the least cost. The fencing type used will be dependent on the species of livestock being excluded from the riparian zone, however, types such as woven wire or high-tensile are often used.

Fencing in flood-prone areas will be more challenging. Whitescarver suggests not fencing

these areas if possible. However, many times floodplain areas are also some of a farm's most productive lands, therefore, producers will want to utilize these pastures for their grazing potential.

"In this case, put up the least expensive fence that will still do the job," says Whitescarver. "In most cases, this will be one or two strands of electric fence."

Producers can look through Gallagher's [electric fencing & livestock watering system](#) options to learn which will work best for their farm or ranch.

Along with fencing, stream and riparian conservation projects will often times also involve planting trees and shrubs along stream banks. These ecological additions help to strengthen stream banks from erosion, absorb nutrients, provide shade, and their leaves serve as important food sources for aquatic life.



And according to Whitescarver, "Research shows streams flowing through forested stream-side buffers are two to eight times more capable of processing in-stream pollutants than a stream flowing through grassy meadows."

Together with conservation efforts to fence out stream areas and provide clean water to livestock, Whitescarver says producers should implement a rotational grazing system as these practices are complementary and when combined will enhance grazing distribution and allow for easier movement of livestock.

This trifecta of management practices - fencing cattle out of waterways, restoring riparian areas to their ecological best, and rotational grazing - Whitescarver says will bring farmers cleaner water, better weight gains, lower vet bills, healthier livestock, better forage utilization, lower mortality, and ease of herd movement. In turn, the ecosystem also becomes healthier and that is the basis of conservation. As farmers' dual role as land stewards, it is their responsibility to manage their soil and water resources so that it does not harm others downstream.

Find more resources on fencing livestock out of waterways, visit [Bobby Whitescarver's website](#).

To inquire about state and federal programs to assist in fencing livestock out of streams in your region, contact a local [USDA](#) or [SWCD](#) office near you.

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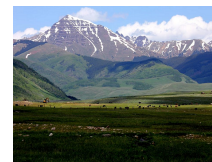
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