

Riparian Notes

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Steve Nelle, NRCS, San Angelo, Texas

Good Enough

You may recall from Note No. 14 that old pickup trucks and creeks share some things in common. The 1950 Dodge pickup is still not functional. The old truck sits in the yard most of the time, and yes, it is probably becoming a bit of an eyesore for the neighbors. But they are generally patient and understanding. Wife and neighbors see that progress that is being made and they realize that truck restoration takes time.

Although it looks much the same from a distance, upon close examination, the truck is actually in much better shape than it was just a few months ago. After adding a new 6 volt battery, rebuilding the carburetor, unclogging the fuel system, fixing the worst wiring problems, the truck has actually made a few slow trips around the block. The biggest obstacle to overcome and the weakest link has definitely been the brake system. Getting the truck to go has not been the problem. Getting it to slow down has been the primary concern.

The truck is on its way to becoming functional, but it's not there yet. At the present time, normal driving is still considered to be unsafe and risky. Until the brake system can be properly fixed, the driver assumes a significant risk of accident, damage, liability and personal injury. Work is ongoing to try and solve the brake system problems. The owner of the truck (that would be me) is trying to do the repairs himself, without having to endure the expense and humiliation of taking it to a brake shop. Such do-it-yourself projects can be somewhat time-consuming, frustrating jobs; but hopefully, they are gratifying in the end.

The old truck started out completely non-functional. Now it is partially functional, but still at risk. In the future, hopefully soon, the truck will be functionally restored and drivable. It will not be in 100% fully restored, perfectly new condition, but it will be good enough.

Creeks have similar categories of functionality. Some poor creeks are totally non-functional, lacking in the basic attributes of a healthy creek system. Maybe such creeks run through developed areas, having been straightened or diked, disrupting natural meandering and the ability of the channel to dissipate energy. In cropland situations, farming might be occurring right up next to the banks, providing no room for channel adjustment. In rangeland settings, the creek may be the primary source of livestock water, and cattle may spend a disproportionate amount of time grazing and loafing in the riparian area. Any of these things can cause serious degradation to floodplain vegetation and the ability of the riparian area to function properly.

Other creeks may be recovering from such severe disruptions, but would still be considered to be in an unsafe condition, and at risk. Grazing management may have recently been altered to allow for spikerush, knotgrass, river sedge and switchgrass to begin to naturally re-establish. Such changes require time to take effect. In the meanwhile, as the creek improves, it is still vulnerable to damage from large runoff events. The landowner can only hold his breath while these improvements are taking place.

After a period of time, as riparian plant communities expand, root systems will begin to bind together to protect channels and banks. The energy of floodwaters will be dissipated. As this happens, creeks become adequately stabilized and can withstand moderately severe flood events. At this stage of restoration, creeks may still not be in perfect shape. There are still further improvements to be made, but creeks are in good enough condition to function properly. In riparian lingo, such creeks are said to be at PFC or Proper Functioning Condition. They pass inspection. They can be considered safe and adequate to do their intended job. Readers may want to find out more about the PFC methodology which is widely used to assess the functional condition of creeks by reviewing this document:

<http://www.blm.gov/riparian/PDF/1737-9.pdf>

The old truck still sits in the yard. But someday, before too long, it will be driving the streets, safe and legal, not perfectly restored, but good enough.