



EXTERNAL PROGRAM EVALUATION OF THE RIPARIAN LANDOWNERS' NETWORK 2008-2010

Executive Summary

The Riparian Landowners' Network is a program designed and implemented by the Nueces River Authority. The program seeks to build a network of landowners and decision makers in the Nueces River basin who are knowledgeable about the importance and attributes of healthy, functioning riparian systems, and use that knowledge to manage riparian areas. Expertise in riparian areas among natural resource professionals, and a general understanding of this information among the public and landowners, is critically lacking in the region of South West Texas. Through partnering with the National Riparian Service Team and the Natural Resource Conservation Service, the Riparian Network program has begun to fill this gap in knowledge and expertise by organizing bi-annually a series of educational Riparian Workshops in areas across the Nueces River basin.

In 2010 the Nueces River Authority contracted with researchers from Oregon State University to conduct an external evaluation of the Riparian Network program. This report presents the findings of this evaluation, and covers the first three years of Riparian Network activities from its inception in 2008 through the end of 2010. Objectives of this evaluation are to: 1) Identify the immediate outcomes of the Riparian Workshops, and examine potential intermediate and long-term, 2) Identify effective program characteristics, and areas for improvement, and 3) Suggest recommendations for improving the overall program. Sources of information and data for this evaluation include 480 pre/post tests designed and implemented by the Nueces River Authority, sign-in sheets from twenty-nine Riparian Workshops, participant observation at three Riparian Workshops, and thirteen semi-structured interviews of past participants and key informants. A summary of findings follows:

Program Outputs

- Between May 2008 and October 2010, thirty riparian workshops were held by the Nueces River Authority, with 655 total workshop participants. 26% of participants indicated that they work for a state, federal, or county government land management agency. 36% indicated they represent a non-governmental organization, business, ranch, or 'self.' The remaining 38% did not answer or provided an unclear response.
- 4,000 Nueces River basin riparian plant guides produced by the Nueces River Authority have been handed out to workshop participants and other interested publics free of charge.

Knowledge and Awareness Outcomes: Increased awareness and appreciation of riparian areas and their attributes and processes was found to be the most significant outcome to date of Riparian Network program activities. Additionally, Riparian Workshops substantially increased participant knowledge about riparian plants, why riparian plants are important, and the importance of large wood

in streams. Increased knowledge about management practices for riparian areas included increased understanding about the impacts of brushing, mowing, and killing riparian plants, and removal of downed trees from streams. Participants use this awareness and knowledge to observe their own riparian areas, particularly riparian vegetation.

Network of riparian advocates: Increased appreciation and awareness of riparian function has motivated many past participants to want to continue to learn, attend or host additional workshops, and help spread the word about future riparian workshops. Riparian Workshops have also been successful at facilitating immediate interaction and relationship building around riparian areas. Opportunities to continue to build these relationships and mobilize newly inspired riparian advocates into an interconnected network, or system of smaller networks, beyond the Riparian Workshops have not emerged.

Natural resource professionals use knowledge: Natural resource agency professionals and other individuals who influence private landowner management practices use or plan on using knowledge gained from the workshops to advise landowner clients they work with. While agents have reported sharing information and advice with landowners, it is not clear how, if at all, their assistance has affected on-the-ground changes to landowner management.

Landowners use knowledge: The overall impact of knowledge and awareness outcomes on landowner management practices is unclear and challenging to measure. This report describes how some landowners have made changes attributable to Network participation, but findings were anecdotal and inconclusive. Changes or alterations of management practices involved ceasing to or not following through with plans to clear riparian vegetation from stream banks. Considering the young age of the program, much of the impact is expected to be felt in the coming years, and further evaluation would be required to measure this impact.

This report concludes with a series of recommendations on the following themes:

- Strengthening programmatic linkages between immediate, intermediate, and long-term outcomes.
- Increasing specificity of program objectives and metrics of success
- Developing opportunities to continue to engage riparian advocates
- Improving mechanisms for measuring performance
- Building partnerships to promote development of technical expertise in region

Barriers to continued program operation and improvements include limited staff time and availability to support the program, a limited number of riparian experts in the region available to facilitate workshops, and lack of secure funding. Chief among these barriers is the lack of a continuous, dedicated funding source. The Riparian Network program is funded entirely from grant and foundation support. While the program has many strong supporters and received numerous accolades, without continued funding the Nueces River Authority will be forced to greatly reduce, or eliminate, the Riparian Network program offerings.