

Riparian Habitat Mitigation Standards and Implementation Guidelines

Background:

Chapter 16.30 of the Pima County (County) Floodplain and Erosion Hazard Management Ordinance No. 2010-FC5 (Ordinance) requires preservation of the riparian vegetation found along watercourses and floodplains, otherwise known as "riparian habitat".

Riparian habitat is found along lakes, springs, streams, creeks, washes and arroyos and provides multiple community benefits. These areas provide open space and recreational opportunities, allow for groundwater recharge, provide natural erosion control, and protect surface-water quality. Riparian corridors allow for higher biological diversity and support wildlife by providing food, water, shelter and nesting or breeding sites. These areas also provide economic and public safety benefits in the form of higher property values along open space and river corridors with healthy riparian habitat, and reduced risk of flooding and erosion resulting in reduced public expenditures required for protection of infrastructure.

Key in preserving these critical natural resources is the riparian habitat protection regulations included in the Ordinance and associated mitigation guidelines. The mitigation guidelines ensure that impacts to riparian habitat resulting from development are minimized and/or mitigated and natural functions of the riparian ecosystem are maintained.

In 2005, the Ordinance (2005-FC2) was amended to include more comprehensive riparian protection regulations, including adoption of new riparian classification maps, which were designed to protect riparian corridors from fragmentation. Under an earlier Ordinance (1999-FC1), the Board adopted a separate document titled *Regulated Riparian Habitat Mitigation Standards and Implementation Guidelines* (onsite guidelines). This document was created to inform applicants of the regulatory process and options for compliance when development impacts riparian habitat. In June 2010, the Ordinance (2010-FC5) was again amended, although revisions focused on floodplain management enforcement policy and incorporating recent FEMA regulations, leaving Chapter 16.30 unchanged.

The Guidelines (onsite and offsite mitigation guidelines) are being updated to reflect changes adopted with Ordinance 2005-FC2. To assist with this task, a Mitigation Working Group (MWG) was formed by the District in July, 2007. The MWG consists of members from the community, development community, public agencies, and conservation organizations in Pima County. The draft onsite mitigation guidelines were reviewed, finalized, and endorsed by the MWG in January 2010 and has been in use since that time. The draft offsite mitigation guidelines are currently under review by the MWG.

Proposed Changes:

The revised Guidelines are currently under public review prior to submission to Pima County Board of Supervisors (Board) for adoption in May 2011. The Guidelines will apply to individual building permits, grading permits, and land development permits associated with commercial and residential development issued by the County, County public works projects, and projects occurring on County-owned property.

Key changes occurring under Ordinance 2005-FC2 include:

- Updated Riparian Classification Maps, based on more comprehensive data, including better resolution imagery, local groundwater data, and plant community mapping (Harris Riparian Maps)
- Including Important Riparian Areas (IRA) as regulated riparian habitat, linking Chapter 16.30 to the goals of the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan (SDCP)
- Including Xeroriparian Class D (XD) as regulated riparian habitat
- Changing the mitigation trigger to 1/3 acre disturbance for ALL classes of riparian habitat
- Changing the trigger requiring Board review and approval of mitigation plans within Class H and/or IRA habitat.

Revisions to the Guidelines include:

- Standards for mitigating impacts to IRA
- Standards for mitigating impacts to XD
- Riparian Habitat Mitigation Plan monitoring requirement
- Expanded mitigation plant list specific to watershed and habitat type
- Procedures for field mapping and onsite plant surveys to determine onsite mitigation requirements
- Water harvesting guidelines
- Information about control of noxious and invasive plant species
- Provisions for creating "defensible space" for fire safety
- Detailed planting, irrigation, and maintenance standards
- Checklist for mitigation plan preparation and requirements
- Guidelines for providing offsite mitigation when onsite mitigation is not feasible.

For additional information about proposed revisions to the Guidelines, contact Carla Danforth or Marisa Rice either by calling 243-1800 or by visiting the District office at 97 East Congress. Descriptions of watercourse and riparian habitat protection efforts are available online at: www.rfcd.pima.gov/wrd/