

PFC (Proper Functioning Condition) What It Is and What It Isn't

by the National Riparian Service Team

PFC is: A methodology for assessing the physical functioning of riparian and wetland areas. The term PFC is used to describe both the **assessment** process, and a defined, on-the-ground **condition** of a riparian-wetland area. In either case, PFC defines a minimum or starting point.

The PFC **assessment** provides a consistent approach for assessing the physical functioning of riparian-wetland areas through consideration of hydrology, vegetation, and soil/landform attributes. The PFC assessment synthesizes information that is foundational to determining the overall health of a riparian-wetland area.

The on-the ground **condition** termed PFC refers to *how well* the physical processes are functioning. PFC is a state of resiliency that will allow a riparian-wetland system to hold together during a 25 to 30 year flow event, sustaining that system's ability to produce values related to both physical and biological attributes.

PFC isn't: The sole methodology for assessing the health of the aquatic or terrestrial components of a riparian-wetland area.

PFC isn't: A replacement for inventory or monitoring protocols designed to yield information on the "biology" of the plants and animals dependent on the riparian-wetland area.

PFC can: Provide information on whether a riparian-wetland area is physically functioning in a manner which will allow the maintenance or recovery of desired values, e.g., fish habitat, neotropical birds, or forage, over time.

PFC isn't: **Desired (future) condition.** It is a prerequisite to achieving desired condition.

PFC can't: Provide more than strong clues as to the actual condition of habitat for plants and animals. Generally a riparian-wetland area in a physically non-functioning condition will not provide quality habitat conditions. A riparian-wetland area that has recovered to a *proper functioning condition*, would either be providing quality habitat conditions, or would be moving in that direction if recovery is allowed to continue. A riparian-wetland area that is functioning-at-risk would likely lose any habitat that exists in a 25 to 30 year flow event.

Therefore: To obtain a picture of riparian-wetland area health, including the biological side, one must have information on *both* physical status, provided through the PFC assessment, and biological habitat quality. Neither will provide a complete picture when analyzed in isolation. In most cases proper functioning condition will be a prerequisite to achieving and maintaining habitat quality.

PFC is: A useful tool for prioritizing restoration activities. By concentrating on the "at risk" systems, restoration activities can save many riparian-wetland areas from degrading to a non functioning condition. Once a system is non functional the effort, cost, and time required for recovery is dramatically increased. Restoration of non functional systems should be reserved for those situations where the riparian-wetland has reached a point where recovery is possible, when efforts are not at *the expense* of "at risk" systems, or when unique opportunities exist. At the same time, systems that are properly functioning are not the highest priorities for restoration. Management of these systems should be continued to maintain PFC and further recovery towards desired condition.

PFC is: A useful tool for determining appropriate timing and design of riparian-wetland restoration projects (including structural and management changes). It can identify situations where instream structures are either entirely inappropriate or premature.

PFC is: A useful tool that can be used in watershed analysis. While the methodology and resultant data is "reach based", the ratings ca be aggregated and analyzed at the watershed scale. PFC, along with other watershed and habitat condition information helps provides a good picture of watershed health and the possible causal factors affecting watershed health. Use of PFC will help to identify watershed scale problems and suggest management remedies and priorities.

PFC isn't: Watershed analysis in and of itself, or a replacement for watershed analysis.

PFC is: A useful tool for designing implementation and effectiveness monitoring plans. By concentrating implementation monitoring efforts on the "no" answers, greater efficiency of resources (people, dollars, time) can be achieved. The limited resources of the local manager in monitoring riparian wetland parameters can be prioritized to those factors that are currently "out of range" or at risk of going out of range. The role of research may extend to validation monitoring of many of the parameters.

PFC wasn't: Designed to be a long term monitoring tool but it may be an appropriate part of a well designed monitoring program.

PFC isn't: Designed to provide monitoring answers about attainment of desired conditions. However, it can be used to provide a thought process on whether a management strategy is likely to allow attainment of desired conditions.

PFC can: Reduce the frequency and sometimes the extent of more data and labor intensive inventories. PFC can reduce process by concentrating efforts on the most significant problem areas first and thereby increasing efficiency.

PFC can't: Eliminate the need for more intensive inventory and monitoring protocols. These will often be needed to validate that riparian-wetland area recovery is indeed moving toward or has achieved desired conditions, e.g., good quality habitat, or simply establish what the existing habitat quality is.

PFC is: A qualitative assessment based on quantitative science. The PFC assessment is intended for individuals with local, on-the-ground experience in the kind of quantitative sampling techniques that support the checklist. These quantitative techniques are encouraged in conjunction with the PFC assessment for individual calibration, where answers are uncertain, or where experience is limited. PFC is also an appropriate starting point for determining and prioritizing the type and location of quantitative inventory or monitoring necessary.

PFC isn't: A replacement for quantitative inventory or monitoring protocols. PFC is meant to complement more detailed methods by providing a way to synthesize data and communicate results.

<http://www.mountainvisions.com/Aurora/pfc.html>