

Manage utility rights-of-way for effective wildlife habitat

Utility rights-of-way can be managed as effective wildlife habitat, if a few guidelines are followed, according to the Wildlife Habitat Council (WHC).

As part of an agreement with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Agricultural Wildlife Conservation Center (AWCC). The WHC has recommended the use of specific best management practices to utility managers.

“All vegetative management plans for rights-of-way should include habitat management surveys, plan for control of invasive species, and recommend use of native plant species,” says Robert Johnson, WHC President.

Johnson says surveys should be conducted, not only to be aware of the general condition and components of the land, but also to identify any animal or plant species that need particular attention.

Invasive plant species are one of the greatest threats to the world’s biodiversity, and regardless of the integrated vegetation management plan adopted by a utility company for a right of way, control of invasive species should always be part of management strategies, Johnson says.

Native plants provide a beautiful, hardy, drought resistant, low-maintenance landscape. Once established, they save time and money by eliminating or significantly reducing the need for fertilizers, pesticides, water, and maintenance.

Native plants also provide shelter and food for wildlife. Native plants attract a variety of birds and butterflies, as well as other beneficial insects and wildlife by providing diverse habitats and food sources.

Among the WHC recommendations for specific ecosystems are:

Grassland:

- Avoid fragmenting grasslands with the addition of roads, buildings, tree corridors, or row crops.
- Where grasslands are bordered by forested tracts, develop a feathered edge between the forest and the grassland.
- If mowing is necessary to maintain the grassland stage, it should only be done during September to March.
- Woody cover should be kept to a maximum of 5 percent.

Shrubland:

- Selectively use herbicides to control tall-growing species in order to maintain a shrub community of 12 feet or less in height. Prune afterwards.
- When corridors are first cleared, avoid a clearing and grubbing operation in which all vegetation is cut down and soil and roots are disturbed. Leave shrubs and preferred low growing trees. Trees cut down during clearing or maintenance activities should be placed along the corridor edge to form brush piles. Log piles are also of wildlife value.

Wetland:

- Consult with agencies before altering any wetland area.
- Diversify vegetative cover to obtain vegetation of different heights and types.
- Create or maintain a wetland with some open areas.
- Do not discourage beavers. Beaver sites typically show a higher richness in wildlife.

Funding for guideline development was provided by the AWCC.

The AWCC, located in Madison, Mississippi, is a fish and wildlife technology development center.



Photo by Stephen Genua

Utility right-of-way

Summary of:

Agricultural Wildlife Conservation Center
Project # 68-7482-2-30

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