

# Beyond Status Quo



Rick Johnstone,  
Conectiv Power Delivery.

*In the right-of-way industry, Rick Johnstone is considered a vegetation management icon. A remarkable 25-year career path has led him to his current position of system forester at Conectiv Power Delivery (service area includes Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey and Virginia). But this is only a portion of Johnstone's achievements. His dedication to building the industry has elevated him to consultant and spokesperson status.*

Most notably, Johnstone has shared insight with electric utilities through public speaking, led the charge as president of the Utility Arborist Association (UAA), contributed as sub-committee member for the Edison Electric Institute (EEI), served as lobbyist for Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment (RISE) and tackled tough issues like spray drift management, invasive species control and wildlife enhancement for electric utility rights-of-way.

With the help of EEI, RISE and Virginia Tech, Johnstone has helped produce a training manual, two videos and a Web site to educate others about vegetation management practices and environmental stewardship.

Johnstone's accomplishments alone are something to marvel at. Even more impressive, however, is the generosity he demonstrates by sharing his experiences and knowledge with others. The following excerpts are examples of Johnstone's philosophies.

## Associations and organizations

"An association like UAA drives professionalism within an industry," Johnstone says. "Certification has

been added over the years to encourage proper training and usage of vegetation management tools, while creating a standard for others to follow. Plus, organizations can help communicate positive industry messages to the public to diffuse mistrust and antagonism within communities.

"Besides public speaking venues, association events offer a wealth of networking opportunities. For someone new to the industry, you will appreciate the advice given by members with 20-plus years of experience.

"And if you think your problem is unique, it is safe to bet someone else in the industry has encountered something similar, if not the same situation. Professional organizations allow you to explore a variety of concerns or experiences with peers."

## Spray drift management

"The EPA has been involved in developing pesticide buffer zones near homes, livestock and businesses to manage the potential for spray drift in the agriculture sector," Johnstone explains. "They planned to impose the same laws on utility rights-of-way without a good understanding of what type of impact the

laws could have on our industry.

"As part of my involvement with RISE, I gave lunch presentations in Washington, D.C., to help educate the EPA about our industry and how electric utility vegetation management differs from the traditional methods found in agriculture. They were surprised to learn how selective our application techniques can be, and that drift is not a serious concern for trained vegetation management practitioners.

"While the outcome is still uncertain, I feel better knowing the EPA is at least considering electric utility concerns before drafting legislation.



"This situation is one that requires help from the industry. Instead of taking a reactive approach to pending legislation, we need to get the word out early, begin networking with lawmakers and regulators to learn where laws are being developed and band together with colleagues to form a unified voice and support the industry's needs.

"Even though a law in a different state is not immediately affecting you, it's important to understand that it could be setting the precedent for regulatory measures to come in your home state."

### **Invasive weeds**

"The same philosophies used in monitoring the activities of regulatory agencies are applicable to invasive species control efforts," Johnstone continues. "The United States is losing 4,600 acres a day to invasive species. A large portion of managed land is controlled by county, state and federal agencies that request no herbicides be used on the land.

"In some cases, these agencies are relying on vegetation management practices that do not effectively control the problem species. If we can educate these people and reduce their fears of herbicide use, maybe we can prevent major land management catastrophes, like the wildfires seen this summer.

"By working with agencies to understand their needs as land managers, we can modify our

vegetation management techniques or tools to satisfy everyone's goals.

"An example of this occurred in New Jersey with the construction of a new power line in an area that was inhabited by two different endangered species – the bog turtle and the swamp pink plant. For the turtle habitat, we cut down woody vegetation and applied herbicides to control the brush, phragmites and purple loosestrife, creating an open meadow where turtles could flourish.

"For the swamp pink habitat, we mowed a path to set new poles and selectively treated a few maple trees, but left the border area in its natural state of forested wetland with laurel bushes and viburnum providing the needed shade for the plant.

"Vegetation managers at Conectiv have received greater acceptance from agencies when they approach the problem by managing for everyone's needs."



*Conectiv continually tests new technologies, like the Brown Brush Monitor™.*

### **Technology**

"Since nature is in a constant state of flux, you need to design a program flexible enough to change as nature changes," Johnstone states. "Trying new technology will continually improve your program. Some things will work, others won't.

"We tested a lot of new technologies through the years. Some of the first Radiarc spray testing was researched on Conectiv property. We are working with Thinvert applications and Widecast nozzles to sidetrim encroaching trees. Most recently, we tested the Brown Brush Monitor on woody vegetation along roadsides in sensitive areas.

"Keeping these new options in mind when talking to agencies is also important. They may be unaware of the advancements in technology and may base their decisions on the past. Keeping them informed will further cultivate positive working relationships."

### **The years ahead**

"Electric reliability is not just an inconvenience anymore, it is a matter of public health and safety, as well as national security," Johnstone adds. "One company letting a tree get into transmission conductors, causing an outage that produces a domino effect and cuts the power off to millions of people, is unacceptable.

"As an industry, we have backed off when others opposed herbicides for vegetation management and when residents protested the removal of trees. But, we need to stop apologizing for using these methods to keep the power on. We have a responsibility. It is maintaining rights-of-way in a manner that is safe and reliable, as well as cost effective.

"Once this goal is satisfied, we can move on to secondary management needs, such as wildlife habitats, endangered species habitats and invasive species control. Best of all, both primary and secondary goals can be easily met with the use of an integrated vegetation management approach.

"The industry's biggest challenge will be continually educating agencies, lawmakers, regulators, other land managers and upper management within utilities about the benefits of integrated vegetation management and the consequences of deferment." *Vistas*