Utility Products
The Resource for Power, Telecom and CATV Product Solutions

Integrated Vegetation Management Programs

Spark New Ideas, Deliver Broad Benefits

Safe, reliable power transmission has always been the No. 1 goal of utility companies. Now, in response to stricter clearance guidelines from the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC), many are discovering the added transmission and environmental benefits of integrated vegetation management (IVM) programs.

"Rather than view increased scrutiny from FERC as a threat, many utilities see this as an opportunity to invest in IVM programs that safeguard power transmission and enhance the unique natural habitats found in rights of way (ROW)," said Richard Johnstone, president of IVM Partners Inc.

Johnstone is an independent consultant who helps utility companies and federal agencies develop vegetation management programs using best practices that accommodate diverse landscapes. He cites his work with an east coast utility company as a prime example of an IVM program that is meeting the company's transmission needs, while providing environmental benefits along the ROW and gaining the trust and approval of communities it serves.

This ROW had been maintained for years with mowing alone. Because it travels through a residential community, transitioning it to an IVM program that leverages strategic herbicide use required much planning, research and communication. But that perseverance paid off.

"Today, the ROW hosts a variety of thriving ecosystems, from native prairies to lush wetlands and has won the favor of the community," Johnstone said.

"When you put the science on the table and have a constructive dialogue with all interested parties, it's really wonderful the things you can achieve," the utility's forestry management director said.

Listen and Learn

Implementing environmental changes must be carefully done, since a variety of audiences use ROW for different purposes. The first step is to listen to the needs and concerns of stakeholders. These might include landowners who use the land for recreation or gardening, federal agencies working to protect natural habitats, and citizens who enjoy woody vistas along roadsides and nature trails.

"The multiple needs are often synergistic," Johnstone said. "The utility can meet safety and reliability requirements while maintaining or enhancing the aesthetics and environmental diversity within the ROW. All it takes is listening, learning, developing a strategic vegetation management plan, and then communicating actions and benefits each step of the way."

The utility's forestry manager shares Johnstone's collaborative spirit, adding that effective internal communication is just as vital to a program's success. Change management is a constant that most corporations deal with. People need help to understand the new model, embrace its benefits and move forward. That requires educating staff and contractor partners, then giving them the best tools to successfully execute the program.

Plan For the Future

Johnstone encourages utilities to consider long-term goals, not quick fixes.

"Bringing in crews for wholesale cutting or broadcast spraying may solve immediate

Reprinted with revisions to format, from the April 2011 edition of **UTILITY PRODUCTS**

clearance issues, but a reactive approach can instigate frustration from the public and other parties who use the ROW," Johnstone said.

A one-size-fits-all approach also overlooks the unique characteristics of the ROW.

"A 40-mile stretch may cross every type of ecosystem, from streams and wetlands to public parks and high-traffic roadways. A successful IVM plan will manage the land to enhance its natural vitality," Johnstone said.

The operative word is "manage," not "maintain." Mowing alone will maintain an existing situation, but it will never rid a ROW of noxious weeds and invasive species.

"To manage is to change the ROW to become self-sustainable. Effective herbicides are what help us implement IVM techniques and, as technologies continue to evolve, we have better tools to accomplish our goals," Johnstone said.

Strategic Tools and Timing

The objective of an IVM program is to implement practices that release native species. It's a cultural practice. Eliminate the undesirable plants and give the desirable ones a chance to compete. Johnstone and the East Coast team worked with herbicides from DuPont Land Management to help achieve that objective.

Darin Sloan, portfolio manager with DuPont, points to two new land management herbicides, DuPont Streamline and DuPont Viewpoint, as new tools for an IVM program. "Both products offer low-use rates and favorable environmental profiles. That makes them ideal for operating in the public eye," Sloan said.

Streamline is a selective herbicide that efficiently targets brush species while promoting a healthy grass understory. "We're taking advantage of natural succession," Sloan said. "When you take out the invasive species that compete for water, sunlight and nutrients, desirable dormant species will return, providing valuable habitat for wildlife and pollinators and creating an aesthetically pleasing landscape."

Sloan also emphasizes the productivity benefits of Viewpoint, a broad-spectrum herbicide that tackles tough brush species including ash, box elder, hackberry, maple, mesquite and sweetgum.

"It's an all-in-one herbicide that is ideal for backpack applications. There's less storage, hauling, mixing and cleanup, which translates into more efficient operation and enhanced operator safety," Sloan said.

"Consider the public—not just brush and weed concerns—when determining application timing," Johnstone said. "Be sensitive to the season in areas with high visual impact, such as roadsides or park trails. If you use a herbicide in June, you'll have leaves changing color a month later. That's not a desirable scene for Fourth of July vacationers."

In high-visibility areas, Johnstone recommends fall treatments that allow dying vegetation to blend with autumn colors.

Rewards

Implementing an IVM program is not without startup costs, but in the long-term an effective program can reduce labor, herbicide use and equipment costs.

"I've conducted research that shows the initial costs to clean up a distribution ROW adjacent to a forest cost the utility approximately $300 per span. But, after the initial cutting and herbicide treatments, we were able to send backpack crews in for selective touchups for just $10 per span," Johnstone said.

Beyond cost savings and clearance, it's the favorable environmental impact that Johnstone and the utility cite as the primary reward of a successful IVM program.

"I'm honored to promote land management best practices across the country," Johnstone said. "With an IVM program, you can provide habitat for declining pollinators and meet safety and reliability needs of a utility at the same time."

The utility sees an IVM program as the ultimate expression of its vision of enhancing customer quality of life, enhancing shareholder value and improving team member well-being.

"This is an extraordinarily exciting opportunity for me as a forestry professional and a vegetation manager," the utility's forestry management director said. "An IVM program allows us to fulfill our mission in a way that brings lasting benefits to the environment. I believe others in the industry feel the same way." ❑

Five Steps to an Effective IVM Plan

Richard Johnstone, president of IVM Partners Inc., encourages utility companies to follow a strategic path when developing and implanting IVM plans:

1. Get to know the right of way (ROW). Use global positioning system (GPS) coordinates to map features such as wetlands, streams, endangered species, and road or park trail crossings.
2. Select best practices and establish treatment thresholds. Consider the needs of the ROW and be realistic. Avoid broad recommendations, such as rigid vegetation height limits, that restrict certain grasses and shrubs from providing natural screens and habitats.
3. Communicate, communicate, communicate. Discuss each element of the plan with internal and external stakeholders. Explain the "why" behind the "what" before beginning work.
4. Implement with care. If partnering with outside contractors, be sure they are trained in best management practices, understand the strategy and share the vision.
5. Follow-through. Regular touchups to control returning pest species are critical to long-term management.