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ROADSIDE REVIEW OF VEGETATION PROBLEMS, POLICY, AND APPLIED RESEARCH

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Abstract: It is only in recent years that maintenance and landscape crews in transportation began to think of themselves as land managers, with some historic exception. Combining interstate and state highway rights-of-way, they care for some 12 million acres of land across the nation. Because their highway corridors slice through your lands, neighbors need to know what they do and why they do it. Together roadside managers are willing to partner with adjacent landowners and agencies to implement current best management practices (BMPs). Some BMPs to address age-old questions of safety, construction costs, and environmental impacts follow, along with suggestions for future change.

The Challenges of Managing Highway Corridors

(1) Responsibility rests on State agencies, less new funding, (2) Every State District is unique in its political and physical environment, (3) State funding is being decreased not expanded to match roadside issues, (4) The benefits of ecological vegetation management are not yet accepted, (5) Education of decision-makers, new crews, contractors, and the public is unending, and (6) We continue to plant pest problems in the name of erosion control, etc., often because sources of native seed are unavailable or too costly.

Lessons Learned from Federal Highway Administration Experience and Research

(1) One size does not fit all; seed mixes must be site-specific to natural regions, (2) Restored or protected native plant remnants have many benefits, (3) Invasive plants are the greatest threat to our natural heritage, (4) Some of our own practices diminish the success of vegetation management, (5) State legislation appears the only sound method of reducing (not eliminating) mowing and/or spraying practices, and (6) Prescribed burns and grazing can safely be used as weed control.

Best Management Practices

Including on-the-ground methods and local/state/national policies now shared across political boundaries: (1) Beginning with NEPA guidance, (2) Recognizing GIS as a useful roadside management tool for planning and tracking success, (3) Learning from other state, federal, and conservation land managers, (4) Adding flexibility during construction, (5) Being specific with specifications, and (6) Establishing a level playing field between private and public sectors.

Biographical Sketch: Bonnie L. Harper-Lore is a restoration ecologist for the Federal Highway Administration. She serves all state departments of transportation as a resource on roadside issues including invasive plants and vegetation management. She is a founding member of the Federal Interagency Committee on Management of Exotic and Noxious Weeds (FICMNEW).