# Utility Rights-of-Way: an asset or a lost opportunity?

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A huge opportunity is lost by utilities ignoring the benefits of Integrated Vegetation Management (IVM). In over 10 years of documenting habitat changes on utility rights-of way (ROW) managed with IVM, the results have consistently shown that selective herbicide use, properly timed with conventional brush cutting, can control target trees and invasive plants, reduce costs and improve habitat for birds, bees, butterflies and other wildlife. These methods are conducive to reducing the risk of wildfire, erosion and stream sedimentation and an opportunity for utility-agency partnerships. Biologists and Foresters employed by US Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, Army Corps of Engineers and the Navajo Nation have all embraced IVM when presented with the indisputable facts of improved energy reliability coupled with improved wildlife habitat.

Utility rights-of-way (ROW) traverse thousands of miles of our beautifully diverse landscape to deliver energy to homes and businesses. Vegetation growing on these 12 million acres of ROW land in North America must be maintained to provide safe, reliable, and economical power. This vast acreage can serve as home to countless birds, pollinators, amphibians and other wildlife when trees and brush are managed with a combination of methods to convert vegetation back to "old field" or prairie type habitat. This selective vegetation management is termed “integrated vegetation management" or IVM.

A pollinator expert from US Geological Survey made the following comment during a recent field workshop at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center on an electric transmission ROW managed for 2 years with IVM:

"Most people mistakenly think we need more forests in Maryland, when we have more forested acres than we did 100 years ago. What we lack is old field and native prairie habitat, such as that found in this transmission ROW, which is perhaps the best pollinator habitat in the Mid-Atlantic States."

Also a US Fish & Wildlife Service biologist endorsed IVM with this observation:

“IVM allows old field habitat to be maintained with minimal disturbance, providing important nesting sites for a suite of birds that have evolved to breed only in early successional habitats. IVM along power line ROWs can help offset the loss of this habitat.”

An Arizona workshop resulted in the acceptance of IVM by the Navajo Nation for improving wildlife habitat while being sensitive to cultural sites. The Clean Water branch of Navajo EPA actually issued a research grant to study IVM for improving rangeland grasses, controlling invasive and problem plant species, and reducing erosion and sedimentation. A 2014 IVM Workshop in high-desert Southwest habitat pointed out to USDA and BLM that a transmission corridor can act as a firebreak when vegetation is managed to low growing, cool burning prairie grass and wildflowers.

# The idea of electric and gas delivery being an environmental enhancement is viewed as a fairy tale. Utility websites will seldom find any mention of the positive environmental attributes of electricity or natural gas delivery; such as ROW corridors being wildlife greenways and aesthetically pleasing nature trails. It seems that utility communication with public agencies, regulators and conservation groups is conducted only when necessary for obtaining permits for new ROW construction or for rate cases. When the utility is attacked for fragmenting forests and cutting through sensitive habitats, their Real Estate and Environmental Departments are mum. Not-in-my-back-yard (NIMBY) mentality is the norm as communities feverishly fight any new transmission or pipeline construction near homes.

So these questions need to be asked:

1. Does your utility only hire professional foresters and biologists for permitting new facilities and not for directing IVM?

2. If foresters are employed, are they directing the IVM program or are Engineers and Asset Managers deciding maintenance activities while the professionals are relegated to contract administrators?

3. Since IVM is a long term commitment, why is necessary funding withheld to meet short term budget projections?

The best defense is a good offense. When is your utility going to go on the environmental offense by adopting, practicing, funding and publicizing IVM?

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