

SAFE TRACK RECORD

Keeping train tracks clear serves more than purely aesthetic purposes. It can save lives.

Vegetation management along rights-of-way is an essential part of complete rights-of-way management. As with roadsides, this holds true for railways. Keeping plant material under control serves a number of purposes and is done in a number of areas.

The yard

Vegetation control begins in the rail yard with bare ground as the goal. This is done for two reasons. First and foremost is the safety of employees. Killing the plants removes potential stumbling blocks to workers and reveals hazardous areas so that they can be avoided or corrected.

Secondly, removing vegetation from the yard promotes improved drainage. Getting water away from the surface reduces the chances of wood railroad ties rotting, which reduces danger and replacement costs.

Since the control is non-selective, herbicides such as Roundup are ideal for this task.

Mainline spraying

Spraying serves several purposes along main track lines. First, aesthetically, it's just better looking. Also, it promotes better drainage, needed for the same reason as in the rail yard: to keep the wood from rotting out.

Lastly, spraying controls vegetation on the berm or shoulder of the tracks. This keeps the weeds and grass from overtaking the tracks and making them hazardous for passage or closing them entirely.

Burning bridges

Bridges also need to be cleaned up for one very basic reason. If there is a fire, the bridge is less likely to burn down. Vegetation is non-selectively removed from head walls and embankments to reduce the risk of a fire contributing to the bridge's destruction.

Signal lines

Selective herbicide applications are made around signal or communication lines to keep them clear but also to leave some plant material to control erosion.



Spraying pesticides from booms mounted on trucks or railroad cars is one of the most efficient ways of controlling rail-side vegetation.

A similar scenario exists where roads cross the tracks. High vegetation must be controlled, so low-growing vegetation is desirable.

In the South, this task is made easier by the existence of Bermudagrass. Since this species is anything but an upright grower, it is ideal for crossings. Controlling weeds and brush while leaving the Bermuda behind is feasible with selective herbicide application.

This is somewhat of a problem in the North, though. There is no cheap, low maintenance, low-growing grass species that is cold-tolerant, too.

Still, it is essential to keep the crossings free of high vegetation—for aesthetics, yes, but more importantly

for safety.

If a crossing presents a hazard because vegetation blocks visibility and an accident results, the railroad company stands a good chance of holding legal responsibility. Even a bad lawyer could get the company cited.

This is generally sufficient motivation to control vegetation. The railroad company usually has a vegetation engineer who develops the control program, which is then contracted out to a private business.

Programs vary with each contract and not all of the areas stated above are addressed in a contract. However, what is done is what's necessary to keep the tracks open and safe. **LM**