

LIKE A GOOD NEIGHBOR

What you don't see on your Sunday drive down the interstate is the behind-the-scenes activity of the nation's roadside managers.

by Terry McIver, associate editor

On any given day, the typical roadside vegetation manager shoulders unseen responsibility for the safety and driving pleasure of the everyday traveler. And although the family out for a Sunday drive (if any families still take Sunday drives) won't see many roadside workers, the industry is becoming more visible in the light of environmental concerns related to pesticides.

For this article, we spoke with some of the country's best roadside vegetation managers and found:

- Most are concerned about how their work impacts the environment.
- They're willing to do what they must to save the environment, yet hope that compromises can be made.
- They take pride in the work they do that is less glamorous but nonetheless satisfying.

Ohio programs varied

Dave Moellenkamp manages 3900 miles and 19 rest areas in northern and central Ohio.

Lately, he's been especially proud of ODOT's wildflower program, which currently covers about two acres of "his" roadsides. A number of states are planting more wildflowers, and Moellenkamp says that experiments have yielded some positive wildflower seeding developments.

"We're using the no-till method," Moellenkamp explains. "Originally, the planting process began by using a dethatcher to scarify the ground. We

found it did a much better job than roto-tilling, and it eliminated a weed problem that was created with roto-tilling. But about halfway through the summer we ended up with a weed patch. The wildflowers did beautifully to begin with, but then the weeds took over."

According to Moellenkamp, a no-till seeder was the solution. It causes less soil disturbance—which minimized weed problems—and minimizes labor. In fact, the idea earned Moellenkamp an "Efficiency in Government" award from the state. The seeder, made by Wild Seed, Inc., of Austin, Tex., plants seed in a 42-inch-wide strip.

Moellenkamp has also conducted recent experiments with turf seed, and he now uses a Triplex seed mix for shady spots at rest areas.

The mix, consisting of Rebel, Bonanza and Olympic, is a narrow-bladed tall fescue that also holds up to lots of foot traffic.

Caught in the middle

Moellenkamp says application of pesticides were cut back over the last six to eight years due to public opinion. But now they're hearing from another group: farmers.

"We're finding that the vegetation has to be managed, and we're going to have to start doing some selective

Dave Moellenkamp of the Ohio DOT is surrounded by wildflowers, which have become a welcome sight for travelers along the Ohio interstate.





As roadway traffic increases, erosion control becomes a more important duty in the manager's daily activity.



The Ohio DOT uses this no-till seeder to plant wildflowers.



Setting standards in applicator training programs

A pesticide applicator training program in the final stages of development at Purdue University could become the national standard for the roadside management industry.

According to Harvey Holt, professor of forestry at Purdue, the program was initiated largely by chemical manufacturers interested in improving the image, efficiency and safety of roadside spraying.

The manufacturers approached the EPA and the Washington, D.C. cooperative extension service, says Holt, for guidance and suggestions about establishing a training curriculum that could easily cross state lines.

As an outgrowth of that discussion, the extension service—under the guidance of Bonnie Poli, national program leader of the extension service pesticide training—put together a national curriculum committee composed of state and landscape supervisors and people in charge of state programs.

The committee drew up an outline of standard material crucial to the performance of all roadside applicators.

Holt says the EPA and USDA have identified standards of certification for labeling, environmental protection and safety, applicator equipment calibration, laws and regulations. Some of the information is "core" material—that is, concepts applicable to every facet of the green industry. The "category" segment is composed of eight disciplines, including forestry, turf & ornamental, and agriculture. "These are well-defined groups of people using particular products in particular ways," says Holt. "They need information to do their job better."

The roadside applicator text includes segments on plant biology; characteristics of plant growth regulators and herbicides; equipment calibration and maintenance; general problems encountered in vegetation management; applicator safety and public relations. The public relations guidelines contain ways to communicate with the public and the media, fielding complaints, and crisis management.

The training program has been modified along the way. In a fine example of cooperation, various industry experts have offered suggestions for improvement.

"The roadside people in most states wear a large number of hats and have a wide range of responsibilities," says Bob Tatman, horticulturist with the state of Ohio, and member of the curriculum committee. "The training program covers all aspects of roadside work, starting from why we spray, and going up through calibration, public relations, and how plants are affected by different types of chemicals."

Tatman and others hope the program becomes the core training material for roadside applicators.

Dan Zay, a consultant from the Indiana DOT, says he's pleased with the support shown by many interested parties.

"In particular," notes Zay, "just the fact that everybody's behind it is important. The videos being developed along with the package will be important tools, educating other people within the department who may oversee herbicide programs or have some influence, yet who don't fully understand application."

Hoyt says the committee plans to present the final training program at the next annual meeting of the National Roadside Vegetation Managers Association in September 1990.

"We want the states to feel they can suggest corrections and additions," says Hoyt. "Our objective is to make it acceptable to the states and the certification and licensing agencies."

—Terry McIver □



Bob Tatman: he and others hope the Purdue program becomes the core training program.

spraying or it's (vegetation) going to take over the right-of-way," explains Moellenkamp.

"We're also finding farmers are becoming aware of the lack of spraying because the weed seeds are blowing into their fields. Before, (the farmers) were all for (reduced spraying); now that we've cut back, we're hearing things."

Most of the state's applications are contracted out, but ODOT crews will do some custom spraying on guardrail broadleaf weeds and cattails. Efficiency and safety are, of course, prime concerns.

"People are more aware of it, and we try to keep it to a minimum," admits Moellenkamp. "We use chemicals that are EPA approved; 14 of our people are licensed to spray, and they also attend training programs every three years to maintain their licenses."

Moellenkamp says the ODOT will soon begin using a computerized spray system designed by Cross Equipment of Albany, GA. The solutions are mixed as they are sprayed. This eliminates leftover solution, and makes for more accurate spraying.

Bob Tatman, horticulturist with the Ohio DOT, continues his own re-research with Ohio's wildflower program. His attempts to obtain native Ohio seed have been moving along slowly but surely.

"We've started our own nursery to grow native wildflowers, which should be much more competitive to vegetation," says Tatman. Other efforts include hand-collecting 65 pounds of seed last year. It's a bidens variety—a stick-like plant with a sunflower bloom, which Tatman hopes to plant on shale to control erosion.

"Caution" signs are up

Dan Zay, landscape specialist for the Indiana DOT, sees a trend of caution in herbicide use as applicators look more closely at spray programs to be sure application is justified.

"In general terms," says Zay, "long-term residual chemicals are scrutinized more closely. If they hang around, there's potential for them to move. I think they give you less flexibility in your program."

Zay and the IDOT are considering centralizing operations more to make sure they have proper control and training among road crews.

Applicator training paramount

Jim Erwin of Oregon's Douglas County Road Department makes training a priority when it comes to application of control products. Six full-timers and three seasonal people work in the county's noxious weed

control program.

"Once a person gets a license through the state department of agriculture," says Erwin, "we feel it takes two years of training before we can send them out alone to apply herbicides. I've been a supervisor for over 15 years and never had a claim."

On the public relations front, Erwin says people in the county have become well-informed as to what's being done and which chemicals are in use. Still, more than 70 percent of Erwin's job involves personal contact with citizens.

"We try to be a good neighbor with everyone," says Erwin. "But at the same time, we want the public to realize we have a job that we have to get done. We can't jeopardize public safety over a difference of opinion. We try to treat every property owner as if we lived there and believed what they believe. We can't make everybody happy, but we try."

Traveling south

Bill Johnson of the North Carolina DOT has changed the name of his department to the "Roadside Environ-

mental Unit," to emphasize the closer link between the highway system and bordering habitats.

A new emphasis has been placed on sedimentation control, with closer adherence to a revised sedimentation law. The law was amended to include more "high quality" water areas. Standards are being changed dramatically to filter out more sediment in run-off water. The changes include

Safety and concern for the environment are the top priorities of today's roadside managers

golf courses and amenity areas.

"We had been designing sediment basins to meet run-off requirements for a 10-year 'storm event,' which is the maximum storm you can expect every 10 years," says Johnson. "Now they require settling efficiencies in basins, and run-off capacity to handle a more severe 25-year storm event."

Johnson says rocks of various sizes, varied filtration rates, dams, stone traps and stone filter basins are much more effective means of erosion control than strict use of fabrics.

Johnson says the North Carolina DOT was approached recently by zoology professors from North Carolina State University interested in using right-of-way areas for habitat protection. Johnson says the task force would like to see certain areas be held in an "old field successional stage," composed of briars and brushy vegetation.

"The brushy zone is the best stage for these type of wildlife," says Johnson. Although the plans are still in the formative stage, there is expected to be a welcome reduction in mowing.

Johnson, like Moellenkamp, has made some changes in the type of grass seed used along roadsides, to require less mowing. "In warm-season areas, like to the east and south of Raleigh, we're adding centipede grass. In cooler-season areas, like Charlotte and Winston-Salem, we're adding hard fescues and a bluegrass mix to improve the turf species."

As Tatman says, the roadside vegetation manager "wears a number of different hats." The secret to success lies in doing it by the book, fostering efficiency among workers, the ability to adapt to adverse conditions, and the wisdom of experience. **LM**

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