

# The Roadside View of a National Weed Strategy

**Bonnie L. Harper-Lore**

**Federal Highway Administration, 400 Seventh Street SW, Washington DC 20500**

Because highway corridors cross your lands, you should care about this view.

Highway rights-of-way total some 12 million acres of land. Each State Department of Transportation acts as a land manager for their rights-of-way. Since nonnative invasive species do not respect political boundaries, how we control those weeds is important to our neighbors. Since the reverse is true, we want to partner with our neighbors to prevent and control increasing weed problems.

Highway vegetation managers want to control these problems for three reasons:

1. State noxious weed law requires control,
2. native plantings and preserves are threatened by these invasive species, and
3. managers want to be good caretakers of the land. The reasons have not always been this simple.

The author, Jesse M. Bennett made the observation that in the 1930s roadside development followed increased public demand for road construction. He went on to say "what is really desired, however, is attractive and useful roadsides which can be obtained by preserving or creating a natural or an approach to a natural condition in keeping with the adjacent or surrounding country. And the significant thing about this is that to follow a natural development is outright economy in road maintenance." His book was entitled *Roadsides, the Front Yard of the Nation*. Unfortunately it was the title of this book, not his words that were unofficially adopted as policy nationally.

By the 1950s an agricultural approach to road maintenance had been established. With the advent of agricultural chemicals, herbiciding and mowing became the "winning" combination used to control roadside plants. The mow-spray method continued to achieve that front yard look. The highway agencies by this time apparently concluded that "the look" was what the public wanted.

The energy crunch of the 1970's brought a halt to this labor-intensive, fossil-fuel eating maintenance approach. Yes, economic constraints led to ecologic solutions for roadsides during this time. Vegetation managers were forced to mow less and spot spray. This change had positive consequences including: increased wildlife habitat, enhanced natural beauty, reduced herbicide use, saved maintenance dollars ... and the public didn't complain!

But not all State Departments of Transportation discovered this common sense ecological approach. Because safety will always be the number one priority for transportation and decision-making, most States attempted to carry on business as usual in the 1980s. But doing more with less in the 1990s helped buoy the idea of integrated roadside vegetation management (IRVM), which is based on the principles of the 1970s ecological approach. IRVM emerged in Iowa through its county highway system. IRVM simply meant using cost-effective and ecologically-sound methods of management on a site by site basis. These methods did not compromise safety and were practical on the ground.

## **Weed Policy Becomes Political**

While roadside policy evolved, an IRVM issue plagued not only roadsides, but all private and public sector lands. By the 1970s, debates about weeds (exotics, pest, aliens, noxious, or introduced, naturalized, or escaped plants) were in full swing. The debates extended to the nation's Capitol where President Carter signed Executive Order 11987 aimed at "exotic organisms". Thus the politics of policy began.

During the 1980s, weed coalitions formed across the country. New terms like biological invasions, biological pollution and biological wildfire caught more of the public's attention to the issue. Coalitions included purple loosestrife coalitions of Minnesota and Wisconsin. Exotic Pest Plant Councils began in Florida and spread to

California, and Tennessee. Strong Western groups (including the Intermountain Weed Action Council (INWAQ) and the North American Weed Managers Association (NAWMA) emerged. All included private and public sector activists trying to stop the apparent economic and ecologic losses to invasive species nationwide. They worked with State legislatures and they educated Congress. But no true national coalition emerged.

The 1990s became the era of weed summits and task forces in pursuit of nonindigenous or nonnative species, biotic invasives, and invasive exotic species. The 1991 Biological Pollution symposium in Indiana attracted 300 people from 35 states to address increasing invasive exotic species problems. As coalitions became more political, Congress requested a study of weeds by the Office of Technical Assessment (OTA). That OTA report underscored the need for national policy, better environmental education, and adequate funding to limit non-indigenous species.

By 1994 a Federal interagency committee was up and running. This committee, the Federal Interagency Committee on the Management of Noxious and Exotic Weeds (FICMNEW), called three weed summits (Denver, Fort Lauderdale, and Albuquerque). The last summit focused on pulling together public private partnerships to agree on a national strategy.

FICMNEW also combined resources to begin public education on the problem. Momentum was building as we learned that some 4,500 acres of new lands were infested with invasive plants each day! Then in 1997 a letter written by Don Schmitz and signed by some 500 scientists reached the desk of Vice President Al Gore. Gore's office called for a Nonnative Invasive Species Committee to define action items for the Clinton administration. The first result will likely be Executive Order 11032 that supports the evolving national strategy. E.O. 11032 will shift more Federal agency attention to the prevention, control, and restoration goals of the strategy on all public lands. It will make the weed issue a national issue of national importance and the public/private sectors will all be asked to pull together.

It is in 1998 then, that no matter what side of a political boundary weeds are found, private/public sector cooperation will begin to prevent their spread, control their numbers, and restore native plants to the land.