

How to Organize and Perform a R.O.W. Program with Partners

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In May of 2002 I came to District 6 and was introduced to a widespread problem on our roadsides. Cogongrass was at a level that seemed to be almost insurmountable. At that time there were no measures being taken in District 6 to combat this noxious weed.

I then was invited to a meeting that was held in Kiln, MS at the public library where I became aware that measures needed to be taken to combat cogongrass and this needed to take place immediately. Randy Browning with the US Fish and Wildlife Service gave a presentation about cogongrass and then we went to several sites where cogongrass had infested pasture and forest land. My eyes were quickly opened to how devastating cogongrass was. At this meeting the State of Mississippi formed the Cogongrass Task Force consisting of Dr. Lester Spell, some of the state representatives, and various officials to start a program to educate and combat cogongrass.

Through herbicide recommendations from Dr. John Byrd, Mississippi State University (MSU), I then started a spray program on our rights-of-way in District 6 (mixtures used are shown at the end of the article). Also, through discussion with Dave Thompson (our Statewide Coordinator) and Dr. Byrd we came up with what is called our "Good Neighbor Policy" (see details at the end). This policy is that if a landowner is targeting cogongrass on their land they can call the MDOT and we will come spray any cogongrass that is on the right-of-way adjacent to their property. Soon afterwards, I was invited by Dr. Byrd to a meeting of the local foresters in Waynesboro, MS. At this meeting the members were told about our "Good Neighbor Policy". The Mississippi Forestry Commission also had a representative at the meeting and he said they would implement the same policy. Within the next couple of weeks I received several phone calls from individuals stating that they needed the MDOT to come and spray cogongrass adjacent to their property.

As our program was getting underway I realized that it was like getting into a cold pool. You don't ease in, you just tighten up your draw string and jump in. I also realized that the limited resources that I had were not going to be enough to make a difference. After much debate, my herbicide budget was raised to help with the extra herbicide that was needed. The first stages of our program targeted the four lane systems and landowners who called in for our "Good Neighbor Policy". The problem that I encountered was that my crew of eight people was responsible not only for spraying cogongrass, but also for all of our herbicide spraying, erosion control, removal of dead trees and any other roadside project that required my attention. Our district consists of 14 counties, so you can understand the time constraints I faced. But, even with limited manpower and resources we did make progress.

Our second year we worked closely with Dr. Byrd and Scott Wright, MSU and various state agencies on a seed head suppression study where we used various herbicides sprayed in winter to see if we could at least cut down on the amount of windblown seeds created by passing traffic. Through this study we realized that we could get suppression, but that later in the year the cogongrass would still produce seed heads. However, Dr. Byrd found that these seeds had a drastically reduced germination rate. We continued our control methods throughout that year and started to see that we were definitely making progress.

Cogongrass control efforts during our third and fourth years were greatly affected by Hurricane Katrina as my program was put on hold while we were in the process of cleaning up debris. The good thing that came out of our fourth year was that my upper management realized we needed to put more emphasis

on our cogongrass program. As a result, I was allotted three more employees and a 2000 gallon spray rig for the sole purpose of targeting cogongrass on MDOT Rights-of-Way.

Starting this year we have gone back and retreated some of the areas that we had previously sprayed. These areas included re-growth or areas that were missed on the first pass. We have also continued on our original program of focusing on our four lane systems. I have adapted the "Good Neighbor Policy" just a bit to include whole routes when at all possible. That is, when we receive a call from a landowner we try to not only spray adjacent to their property but also go ahead and spray the entire route. We also take it a step further and spray over the fence line or R.O.W. line to a certain extent to help out that landowner.

In addition to these control efforts, I have assisted Mrs. Patty Rogers from the Coastal Plains RC&D on educating counties that are starting a cogongrass program about the methods that the MDOT use. Also through our association with Mrs. Rogers we have embarked this year on a partnership that included not only MDOT and Coastal Plains RC&D, but also the NWTF, Mississippi Forestry Commission, NRCS and several counties. Through this partnership we targeted an area of interest in four southeast Mississippi counties and are trying to spray every route within the area. We are in the process of erecting signs to inform the traveling public of what has been done and all the parties involved. From the standpoint of the MDOT this partnership opened up a door with the Mississippi Forestry Commission to allow us to spray cogongrass on state highway routes through National Forests, which previously was not possible.

In my time fighting this noxious weed I have realized that we are a long way from having a handle on cogongrass, but we are slowly but surely making progress. I think that we still have to educate not only the public, but the people who make the decisions within my own job that we should not rest on what has been accomplished so far. A lot more effort is needed if we will ever be on top of this mounting problem. Just remember - while we are scratching our heads and wondering what we need to do next cogongrass is only getting worse.

"GOOD NEIGHBOR POLICY"

Our "Good Neighbor Policy" is implemented mainly by word of mouth. Through the grants that are available from both the Bureau of Plant Industry and NRCS, landowners are informed of this policy at the time of applying for the grant. Working with Mrs. Patty Rogers has also been a means of communicating our policy with the public. With her efforts in public education she passes the word along to landowners and county officials. Also we communicate our policy through various organizations such as Mississippi Vegetation Management Association, National Roadside Vegetation Management Association and the Southern Weed Science Society. In addition, all of our Area Superintendents and County Superintendents are aware of the policy and can relay this to landowners when they are approached.

When an individual finds that they have cogongrass on an MDOT Right-of-Way adjacent to their property they can either call our District Office or they can call me directly. We also work well between districts and inform each other when a request comes in if it is outside our district. Once the request is made I go to the area in question and meet with the landowner to make sure I get the boundaries of their property to make sure I spray everything that is connected to them. This year has been different because I have tried to spray whole routes instead of just at the landowner property. I then coordinate my personnel to make sure that the request is taken care of in a timely manner. Normally I try to take care of requests within a two week time frame. When spraying, we spray everything touching the property as well as the opposite side of the highway and median area when applicable. Also, if a patch of cogongrass extends across the R.O.W. line and onto the landowners property we spray that whole patch. However we do not take the state equipment off of the MDOT R.O.W., but instead we pull the hose and spray it. We also assist the landowner to make sure they understand the process that we use when spraying. After completing the application I then keep a check on the area and inform the landowner to keep in contact with me and let me know if another treatment is needed.

MIXTURES FOR COGONGRASS

Mixture for areas with no hardwood trees:

Glyphosate – 2% V/V

Imazapyr (2 lbs a.i.) – 1% V/V

Non-Ionic Surfactant - .25% V/V

Mixture for areas with hardwood trees:

Glyphosate – 2% V/V

Non-Ionic Surfactant - .25% V/V

Mixture for Seedhead suppression j:

Imazapic – 12 ounces/acre

Non- Ionic Surfactant - .25% V/V

Cost-share, incentive and grant programs currently available to combat cogongrass

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There are numerous sources potentially available for funding invasive plant control activities. While the majority of these opportunities are supported by federal agencies, there are some which are supported by corporations or non-profit organizations as well.

The United States Department of Agriculture sponsors a very aggressive grant and partnership effort encompassing approximately 20 named programs. Similarly, the United States Department of the Interior sponsors several grant programs through its agencies. For example, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (<http://www.fws.gov/grants/>) has grants available to State Agencies, Local Governments, Conservation Organizations, Private Individuals, and Specialty Interests. There are several very useful websites that define these programs and which are designed to assist applicants in preparing their submissions. The website <http://www.grants.gov> is designed to be a unified source to electronically find, apply for, and manage Federal assistance opportunities. The Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance (<http://www.cfda.gov>) is a comprehensive list of all domestic Federal grants which can be very useful when searching for potential funding sources.

The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) is a private, non-profit, 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization established by Congress in 1984 which works to foster cooperative partnerships to conserve fish, wildlife and plant resources. NFWF uses challenge grants such as the Pulling Together Initiative (PTI) which encourage partnerships to stimulate private funding for conservation. Additional sources for funding may be viewed at the Environmental Grantmaking Foundation website (www.environmentalgrants.com) and on the Center for Invasive Plant Management website (www.weedcenter.org).