



ABOVE: Al Ehley wades through a tall stand of reed grass, a variety commonly found around Iowa marshes. This particular stand was found in a road ditch that ran near a creek. **RIGHT:** Cool-season grasses go dormant during the hot weeks of summer, creating places for ditches to erode, which can threaten both the roadbed and adjacent farm fields. The eroded areas can also become a breeding ground for weeds. Properly managed native grass areas will stabilize roadside areas, says Ehley.

Roadway program can reduce weed pressure on fields

By Bob Davis

Iowa Farmer Today

CEDAR FALLS — Al Ehley would like to convert 600,000 acres in Iowa to native prairie.

It's land that spreads across Iowa, land along roadways that divide Iowa's farmland into a checkerboard pattern.

It's ditches that Ehley would like to change.

Cool-season grasses over several years lose their vigor, die and leave holes in the vegetation cover. The holes can erode or be a seedbed for weeds.

Al Ehley
SCS roadside specialist

Ehley is state specialist for the Integrated Roadside Vegetation Management Program at the University of Northern Iowa here.

Ehley, who works for the Soil Conservation Service, took over the roadside program in 1988 when six Iowa counties were trying this new approach to weed management.

Twenty-nine counties use the program, and more have ex-

pressed an interest in converting from traditional weed control.

"We are looking at this program as a water-quality program, because of the use of herbicides and impact of herbicide runoff," Ehley says. Ditches, designed to carry water away from the roadway, probably carry away a lot of herbicides, he theorizes.

In the mid-1980s, county weed commissioners began looking for other ways to treat roadside weeds, because current programs were not doing the job.

"If anything, the weed conditions were getting worse, instead of better, in some areas of the state," Ehley says.

So, what was the problem?

"They came up with the theory that the spraying was not being done properly," he says.

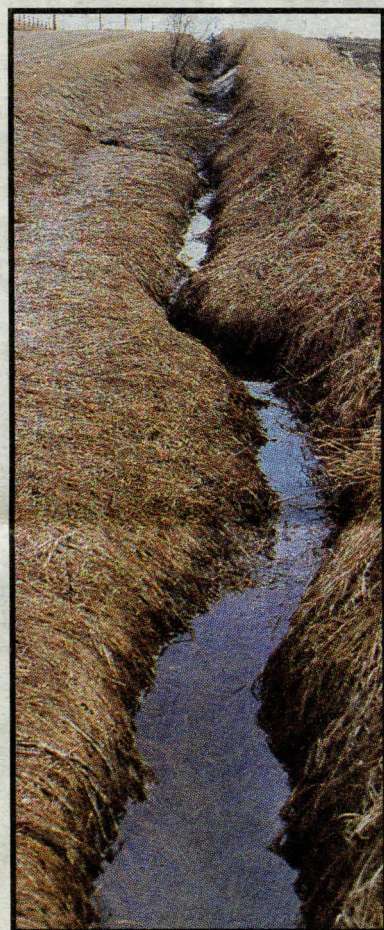
A common practice for counties was to hire a spraying company. The spraying company would bill the county for the amount of herbicide used, he says.

This system offered little control over the use of the herbicides.

"In fact, the effect was the opposite. This system did nothing to prevent the overuse of spray. It encouraged the use of chemicals," he adds.

Also many of the spraying companies came from outside the state so counties were using tax dollars to pay outsiders to spray.

"Now, with this program the



money spent is staying in the county and they actually employ someone from inside the county," Ehley says.

Also, he says, much of the vegetation encouraged weed growth.

It was common for many years to plant cool-season grasses along Iowa's roads. Ditches were seeded with non-native grasses such as brome, fescue, timothy or red top. Those grasses grow well during the cool seasons of spring and fall but go dormant during the hot, dry summer.

Too, the cool-season grasses over several years lose their vigor, die and leave holes in the vegetation cover. The holes can erode or be a seedbed for weeds.

Roadside managers still spray to control weeds in ditches, but they use spot-spraying techniques. Specific weeds are targeted at the most-vulnerable time by a particular chemical.

Another management technique in this program is roadside burning. Successfully burn

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ing a ditch requires planning and careful preparation, he says.

Time of year, weather conditions, and adjacent crops must be considered when burning a ditch, says Ehley, who works out of an office supplied by UNI.

This office, which coordinates roadside-management efforts throughout the state, is funded through the Resource Enhancement and Protection Program at an annual cost of \$50,000.

If the REAP program is cut, as has been threatened, it probably mean the end of Ehley's office.

The roadside program would continue at the county level, Ehley believes. Its development has been encouraged by the Living Roadway Trust Fund established in 1988 by the Iowa Legislature. ■