

The Stealth War on Quail & Songbird Habitat

– and on Wildflowers, Native Shrubs and Beneficial Pollinating Insects

It is the most insidious, government-sponsored assault on the natural environment in Kansas, Nebraska and many other states. Although those waging this war would never acknowledge it – because they have never thought about the unintended consequences – it is occurring in hundreds of counties and has become “business as usual.” There is little if any oversight and no effective way of evaluating the results of millions of dollars of excess spending, no environmental assessment, and few effective ways for landowners to collectively protect their interests in the thousands of miles of land that involves their properties.

Foremost, it is a stealth chemical war that counties wage on country roadsides, in many cases on every roadside in a county. This “chemical warfare” is generally conducted by the county noxious weed departments with new versions of “agent orange.” In Riley County, Kansas for example, most of the county roadsides are broadcast sprayed every fall with a combination of 2,4-D (2,4-Dichlorophenoxyacetic acid) and Tordon (the trade name for a chlorinated derivative of picolinic acid, a systemic herbicide used for general woody plant control). That is in addition to the herbicide applications applied earlier in the growing season.

I have had more than one occasion to coincidentally be behind a spray truck that was going down the road with the spigots turned on with herbicides shooting out over the entire roadside area extending to the fenceline. Sometimes the sprays go beyond the fencelines, as occurred several



years ago at our farm in Washington County. On at least one occasion in Riley County I was following a truck spraying when the wind was blowing at least 20 mph. Most recently, in early November as I drove from just east of Green to Randolph, I followed a county sprayer that sprayed all the way. If there were noxious weeds, they didn't extend the entire ten miles. I asked the driver why he was broadcast spraying everything and his response was, “To control musk thistle and bindweed.” I suggested that there wasn't any evidence of either. He said, “But there would be if we didn't spray.” I went back later in the day and made several stops, but couldn't find any of either plant. Imagine if the entire landscape was sprayed with this philosophy – there wouldn't be a natural prairie left and biodiversity would be decimated.

Although Riley County is a relatively small county with far fewer country roads than most counties in Kansas, it does have 233 miles of county-maintained roads and a much higher than average budget. We are not aware of how much is precisely spent (including chemicals, salaries and



American plum thickets and wild rose sprayed along a country road in Rock County, Nebraska, but the same can be seen along any of thousands of miles of rural roads throughout the heartland of America. A Riley County Noxious Weed Department truck on a fall quest to spray 75 percent of the roadsides in the county.

benefits, equipment and upkeep, fuel and other operations, etc.) on this type of roadside herbicide spraying, but the county's noxious weed department spent \$99,235 on herbicide chemicals last year, and had a total department budget of \$495,043.

On a statewide basis, expenditures by county weed departments on herbicides are just over \$10 million, and total budgets add up to \$23,477,307. The average budget is \$230,169. There are approximately 80,500 miles of county-maintained roads in the state. In addition there are likely tens of thousands of township-maintained roads. In some



Butterfly milkweeds and scores of other native prairie wildflowers are increasingly rare along rural roadsides due to routine scheduled spraying – whether it is "needed" or not. Folks at the Farmers Market and rural families frequently comment that it is increasing difficult to find wild plums, elderberries and other natural fruits and berries. This Bell's Vireo was photographed singing in a roadside thicket on our Washington County farm, but the next year the thicket was sprayed.



counties, as in Wabaunsee County, they are routinely sprayed with a cocktail of herbicides as well.

Adding insult to injury, counties are also, unknowingly, waging "biological warfare" on quail, songbird and Cottontail Rabbit habitat, and on wildflowers, native shrubs and vines and beneficial insects. It is standard practice for county road departments to plant roadsides to brome grass following reconstruction or disturbance. Brome grass is not native and worst of all it is invasive. It "takes over" many areas where it has been planted, and it crowds out many of the native plants. It is about as useless for most wildlife species as Astro turf and it even undermines the value of such cover as

plum thickets for quail. Northern Bobwhites need thickets and associated cover from which they can run through, hide in and fly out of. Brome grass impedes all of those habitat qualities. Brome grass, fescue, reed canary grass and other invasive grasses further diminish the value of habitat by reducing the abundance of forbs (native legumes and other broad-leaf plants, often referred to as wildflowers or weeds depending on a person's understanding or lack of understanding of their values). These plants provide much of the food required by upland game bird chicks, and songbirds. The invertebrates, seeds, fruits and buds associated with or produced by forbs are critically important.

For those of us who grew up on a farm or ranch (or in a city) and remember country roadsides where one could see native grasses, wildflowers, native shrubs and vines, coveys of quail and an array of nesting songbirds, the transformation to relatively sterile roadsides with few of these amenities is disappointing. As recently expressed by the chairman of our Board of Trustees, the "first rule of operation," borrowing from medical ethics, should be "to do no harm."

Maintaining a healthy prairie plant community of native grasses and wildflowers, with limited chemical applications and requiring less fossil fuel use, is actually less expensive than the present methods employed. In addition, a

stable native plant community without a lot of disturbance is less susceptible to becoming portals for undesirable invasive plants.

It appears that the only way for taxpayers, landowners and other residents to correct this assault on the land, wildlife, and the public interest in ecological stewardship is to begin to organize and work with organizations that share our collective views. Landowners may also want to provide county officials with legal notification that the rights-of-way land associated with their property should not be sprayed – except spot treated when there is a presence of noxious weeds.

– Ron Klataske