Managing Natural Vegetation

Early Successional Habitat Management

Small Scale Solutions for your Farm

NRCS
Natural Resources Conservation Service

Do you have small areas on your farm that are not productive?

Would you like to attract more wildlife to your farm?

"Early successional" plants are those that first begin to grow on an area following a disturbance to the existing vegetation, such as a fire. Managing these plants that grow naturally on your farm. can increase diversity and provide habitat for common wildlife species such as deer, rabbits, quail, turkey, doves, and songbirds.

Edges of waterways and other areas that are difficult to farm can be managed for wildlife habitat.

How can management of natural vegetation benefit you and your farm?

- Easy and inexpensive to establish and maintain
- Can be established on small areas, such as field edges, areas where crops are not productive or where equipment is hard to operate
- Provides a diversity of fruit, browse, seeds, insects, structure and cover important to many kinds of wildlife
- May increase diversity and populations of wildlife, pollinators and other beneficial insects on the farm

Early successional vegetation includes grasses, weeds, and wild flowers that grow naturally on your farm and can provide important habitat for wildlife.

How much does it cost?

Establishing and maintaining early successional habitat on your farm is relatively inexpensive if you already own a tractor and disc harrow or mower. Costs will be higher if herbicides or heavy equipment are used. Annual costs may include:

- Equipment time, fuel, maintenance
- Labor for establishment and annual maintenance
- Less crop production area if some areas are no longer cropped

Bobwhite Quail (Colinus virginianus)

Eastern Cottontail (Sylvilagus floridanus)

Mourning Dove (Zenaida macroura)

What types of early successional vegetation benefit wildlife?

Wildlife need a variety of native grasses, weeds, saplings, and small shrubs for food, nesting, raising young, escaping from predators, and resting. Areas of natural vegetation also attract beneficial insects, which prey on insect pests in crop fields, and provide food for quail, turkey and songbirds. It can also serve as habitat for insect pollinators necessary for crop production.

Fruits – Important fruits include wild grapes, plums, hawthorns, blackberry, honeysuckle, greenbrier, rattanvine, and poison ivy. These plants also provide cover for nesting, resting, rearing young, and escaping predators.

Blackberry
Rubus argutus

Carolina Foxtail
Alopecurus carolinianus

Seeds – Seeds of various grasses and weeds are important to many birds and small rodents. Small seeds, like those produced by pigweed, lamb's quarters, foxtail grass, and crabgrass, are favorite foods of doves.

Browse – Many species of wildlife browse on succulent green parts of plants, nipping off the leaves, young shoots and tender branches. For herbivores, like deer and rabbits, browse forms the bulk of their diet. Many other wildlife species graze at least occasionally on grasses, weeds, tender leaves, twigs, and buds.

Blacktailed deer browsing on weeds growing in tall grass

How do I establish and maintain natural early successional vegetation?

Areas to consider for establishment and management of natural vegetation include field edges, fields that are not being cropped, woodlands having an open canopy, and areas in cropland fields that are unproductive or difficult to farm.

Natural vegetation can be established and maintained with periodic disturbance, such as mowing, disc harrowing, herbicides, prescribed fire, or a combination of these to promote desirable native grasses, weeds, saplings, and small shrubs. A different portion of the area should be disturbed each year, allowing vegetation of different ages to continue to grow on the remainder of the area for 2 to 3 years.

These may look like weeds, but to many wildlife species this would be a perfect place to find food, nest, raise young, escape from predators, or rest.

Borders of natural vegetation can attract beneficial insects for pest control and provide important wildlife habitat.

Another option is to combine strips of native vegetation with strips of field crops that attract wildlife. This approach is best if you want to concentrate the animals for hunting or wildlife watching.

Vegetation should not be disturbed from the late spring through early fall, the nesting season for many birds.

Disking – Disc harrowing is the preferred method of disturbing the soil and vegetation. The only equipment needed is a tractor and disc harrow. The blades on the harrow should be set as straight as possible. You will not want to plow the ground as if you were planting a crop. Instead, only disturb the soil surface and leave some vegetation on the ground. Also, try to follow the contour of the land whenever possible.

Disc Harrow

Only harrow one-third to one-half of the area each year. It is often easiest to disk strips across an area, skipping one or two strips on each pass, then returning to disk these strips over the next 2 years. Timing of harrowing changes what vegetation will come up.

Disking during the cooler winter months usually encourages the growth of fall seeded plants like ragweed, partridge pea, beggar weeds and lespedezas. Pay attention to what comes up, and if you do not get the vegetation you want, change the time of harrowing the next year.

Mowing – Mowing can be used to maintain and encourage browse, fruit, seed and insect production. Mowing in the early spring stimulates browse and fruit production on honeysuckle, greenbrier, and blackberry. Mow about one half of the area the first year, and the other half the following year.

Mowing

Prescribed burning – Controlled fire can also be used to disturb grasses and weeds and to kill saplings and shrubs after 2 to 3 years of growth. Sufficient firebreaks are needed on the boundary to avoid burning adjacent areas. A firebreak should be harrowed across the area so that a maximum of one-half is burned in any year.

Maintenance – Maintain the areas with periodic

- mowing,
- disc harrowing, or
- prescribed burning,

Disturb a different one-third to one-half of the area each year. In any one year, only a part of the area should be disturbed, and vegetation that is 2 to 3 years old should be left on the remainder.

Help is Available

NRCS Natural Resources Conservation Service

SMALL SCALE SOLUTIONS FOR YOUR FARM

Technical Help Is Available

Your local Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) office has experienced conservationists that can assist you with managing natural vegetation for wildlife habitat. They can also help you develop a Conservation Plan to solve other problems you have identified on your farm.

There is no charge for our assistance. Simply call your local office at the number listed below to set up an appointment and we will come to your farm.

You may also be eligible to receive financial assistance, through a state or federal program. Your NRCS office will explain any programs that are available so you can make the best decision for your operation. All NRCS programs and services are voluntary.

Helping People Help the Land

For More Information Contact the:

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