

# Crossroads

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## Vegetation management is a growing concern

"To tell you the truth, I don't think we keep up with it," says Emmer Shields, Ashland County Highway Commissioner. In his far northern county, alder quickly invade the roadsides, many of which are steep and hard to mow.

In the south, tall, fast-growing grasses and noxious weeds are the problem. "With the number of road miles and the amount of staff we have, it's virtually impossible to keep up with it," says Steve Haag, Dane County Highway Superintendent.

Most counties use the state's mowing guidelines even on the county highway system: mowing as often as necessary to open vision corners and keep the shoulder clear for 15 feet or down to the bottom of the ditch line. Brush is mowed once every three or four years and noxious weeds are treated with herbicides as necessary. The ditch back slope and right of way area are generally left unmowed except that large-growing woody plants on the clear zone may be mowed every three or four years if necessary.

"Our mowing and herbicide policies will probably change little, but we need to reconsider how we design, plant and maintain our roadsides," says Dick Stark, regional landscape architect at the WisDOT Division of Highways. He is part of a work group that is writing a new Vegetation Management Plan for the Wisconsin Department of Transportation. A first draft is expected later this year, with the final version to be in place in 1996.

In the past, responsibilities for design and maintenance rested with different groups in WisDOT. The new plan seeks to integrate these programs and to clarify how much effort should be expended to maintain specialized plantings like prairie. The group also plans to identify budget resources for maintenance, investigate new erosion control techniques, and integrate new technologies.

One project that gets underway this summer is looking at thistle control. Under a WisDOT contract UW–Madison's Agronomy Department will be experimenting with different combinations of mowing, herbi-



*Keeping grass mowed and ditch slopes visible is a constant roadside maintenance challenge.*

cide treatment and biological control to see what works best to control this aggressive weed.

Despite the challenges, it's important for safety to keep shoulders and vision corners clear, and it's important for drainage to keep ditch bottoms clean.

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