

Utility Arborist Newsline

NOV/DEC 2019

VOLUME 10

NUMBER 6

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**The Power of Pollinators Reclaiming ROW Habitat**

By Kevin Baggett, Christina Cunningham, and Russ Maxwell, CNUC Consulting Utility Foresters (on behalf of North Georgia Electric Membership Corporation)

While the safety and reliability of electric and gas facilities are of great importance for our society, vegetation managers and utility arborists also focus strongly on environmental stewardship. Suppressing incompatible and undesirable vegetation around electric and gas lines provides optimal accessibility for vegetation management (VM) crews. Emergency service crews must also have quick and efficient access to their rights-of-way (ROW). These ROWs are not appropriate homes for tall or fast-growing vegetation that threaten service reliability. However, they are very useful swaths of land. The environment surrounding these facilities are prime habitat for a large variety of species such as birds, reptiles, mammals, amphibians, and most importantly, pollinators. Utilities, from the smallest cooperative to the largest transmission system, are uniquely poised with the opportunity to participate in environmental stewardship through habitat reclamation.

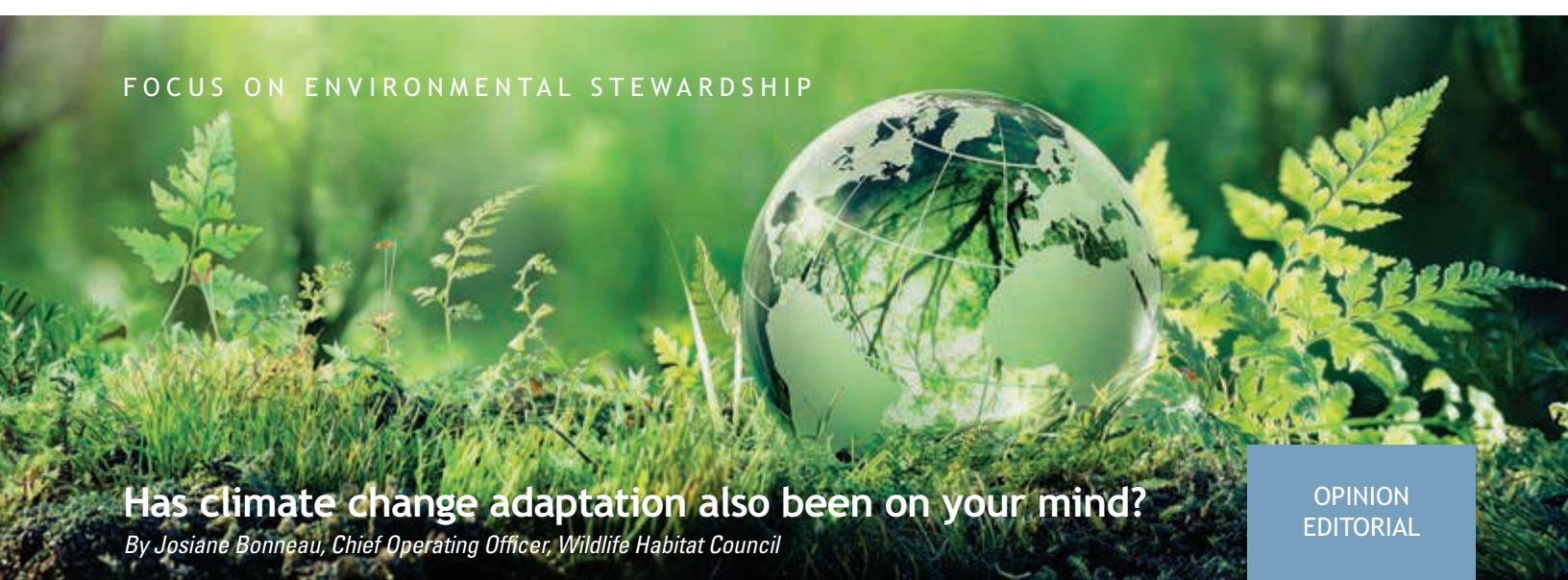
North Georgia Electric Membership Corporation (NGEMC) is situated in the northwest corner of Georgia spanning across six

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counties and possessing a little less than 6,500 miles of overhead distribution lines. This territory contains low-lying swampy areas, flat farmlands, and high mountain passes. A significant extent of its membership is in mountainous, rural terrain, which provides difficult and poor access to utility ROWs. An expansive system, diverse topography, and the discontinuation of herbicide application within the past decade make ROW maintenance for NGEMC even more costly and challenging. The incompatible and undesirable vegetation that has grown freely since the stop of herbicide treatments has increased maintenance costs as cycle busters and high-priced, hot-spot trimming are required to prevent outages. This process of ROW management, which involves the mowing and hand cutting of woody growth, creates a disturbance in the

OPINION
EDITORIAL

Has climate change adaptation also been on your mind?

By Josiane Bonneau, Chief Operating Officer, Wildlife Habitat Council

For many of you, every day brings an opportunity to discuss, hear, or learn about climate change. The “why and how” is often on the forefront of the conversation in what seems at times like an endless debate. Publications on current and future climate change impacts are clear and frequent; a most notable example released a few months ago by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports an alarming global warming of 1.5°C.

The IPCC report, unlike many of its precursors, refreshingly weighs in on land use and sustainable land management related to climate change adaptation and mitigation. However, the context is still adapted to large swaths of land managed by government—not the private sector. The solutions investigated are also limited to decade-long projects of reforestation and agroforestry which are rarely fitting with ROW management.

The more I hear about such long-term incompatible tactics, the more I want to influence the discussion of adaptation and mitigation to focus on **immediate, practical solutions** for land managers.

The Wildlife Habitat Council (WHC) had the opportunity to present recommendations for climate adaptation actions just last year at the 12th Symposium for Environmental Concerns on Rights-of-Way (ROW) Management (ROW 12) in Denver and again at the 2019 Trees and Utilities Conference in September. Climate change adaptation strategies, in

general, seek to enhance the resilience of ecosystems and the built environment against the impacts of climate change. Examples of these strategies for natural systems include managing ecosystems to include species more tolerant of more pronounced cycles of drought and precipitation and enhancing movement corridors for wildlife as species ranges change.

From a conservation perspective, it is proven that an array of land management practices in use in ROW management support climate change adaptations. From a WHC Conservation Certification® perspective, hundreds of programs across the globe confirm the pursuit of activities supporting resilient ecosystems and wildlife populations by corporate landowners. From a utility perspective then, why are we not hearing about the leadership that many corporations are demonstrating in embracing corridor creation, invasive species control, management of shifting species ranges, etc.? All of which are considered valid approaches to more resilient ecosystems by the scientific community and government bodies?

I asked that last question at the conferences. Why were the attendees at ROW 12 and Trees and Utilities, many VM professionals, not taking credit for the climate change adaptation efforts and outcomes they were clearly committed to?

The unofficial answers we collected from the audience pointed to one

main barrier: risk, mainly with external stakeholders, in framing VM and stewardship actions within a climate change perspective.

Familiarity with climate change adaptation in the corporate environmental sector appears to be evolving. Adaptation is still often a novel topic for many in any given room, as is the correlation between the suggested practices and their direct support of climate change adaptation. In a risk-conscious corporate environment, new concepts can be challenging to defend and sell. Therefore, it is not surprising that professionals reported their concerns in proposing to leadership an external message linking their land management efforts to climate change adaptation benefits.

Without internal buy-in, a public-facing narrative aligning land management practices to climate change adaptation benefit will remain challenging. However, I am convinced that we can—and should—view such land management practices within a climate change adaptation framework and that when we do so, we will advance meaningful change that is immediate and practical. To do this, we need to raise awareness about the ROW management actions that support climate change adaptation, develop a process to mainstream into industry, and create a language to allow managers to talk about it. Only then will we reduce the perceived risk, increase participation, and contribute nature-based solutions to a complex challenge.

UTILITY ARBORIST ASSOCIATION

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International Society of Arboriculture

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