Clayton County Conservation Integrated Roadside Vegetation Management Plan

Version 1
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Executive Summary

This version of the Clayton County IRVM plan represents an update to the goals and strategies of roadside vegetation management within Clayton County. This document is intended to provide guidance regarding the policies, best-practices, and rationale behind the establishment and use of native plant communities along transportation corridors to reduce maintenance load, improve ecosystem function, and beautify the Clayton County transportation system.

This plan also documents the positions among county staff relevant to the IRVM program, their roles within the program, the relevant legal authority under which the program is implemented and where, and the requirements for the sound management of transportation corridors.

By providing program history along with former and current department policy, this document provides context for the reasons and motivations behind decisions relating to roadside vegetation management.

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Goals

The Clayton County IRVM program seeks to provide safe passage along county transportation routes, and easements by harnessing the qualities of native plants for brush control, soil stabilization, and flood mitigation.

The guiding principle of Clayton County IRVM is to make best possible use of taxpayer dollars, with consideration to the financial budget and time of county staff, the safety of Clayton County motorists and pedestrians, and the legal requirements of Iowa code and county policy. The ecosystem services of native plant communities improve the longevity of transportation systems, decrease long-term maintenance costs, and enhance the aesthetic and wildlife habitat value of county transportation routes. To that end, the goals of Clayton County IRVM include:

- Utilizing native plants to meet certain safety and functional requirements of transportation systems such as minimum sight distance, clear zone, and all others outlined by applicable law and policy at the county, state, and federal level.

- Establishing an inventory of transportation resources, including vegetation cover/type, remnant prairie, no-spray zones, and adopted right-of- way.

- Utilizing the most up-to-date methods and resources to establish and maintain self-sustaining native plant communities wherever practicable.

- Reseeding areas disturbed by construction, maintenance, or natural events (flooding, windstorms, etc.) to prevent erosion. When possible, disturbed areas will be seeded with native grasses and forbs.

- Establishing, maintaining, and promoting diverse native plant communities along transportation corridors to enhance wildlife habitat and aesthetic appeal.

- Control or eliminate the presence and spread of invasive plants using an integrated approach: chemical, mechanical, biological, or some combination therein depending on the most appropriate methodology for a given site condition.

Program History

Clayton County developed its Roadside Vegetation Management Department (RVMD) in 1990. The creation of the RVMD stemmed from recurring issues of trees and brush creating unsafe conditions by impacting visibility, drifting snow, and the rate of ice formation and melting.

At the time, Integrated Roadside Vegetation Management was a relatively novel concept. Most counties in the preceding decades, Clayton included, had planted their disturbed right-of-way to readily-available cool-season grasses like Smooth Brome and Kentucky Bluegrass. Weed control came mostly in the form of blanket-spraying, leading to significant issues with pesticide drift and inadequate control of certain weeds like Canada Thistle.

Through the 1960's, 70's, and 80's research into Iowa's roadsides began to demonstrate that plantings of native grasses and forbs along transportation systems improved erosion control, decreased maintenance requirements by better competing with non-native species as well as woody vegetation, and greatly improved wildlife habitat.

An updated management plan written in 1995 by former roadside manager Louis Eberhardt outlines extensive challenges to the program borne out of Clayton County's rugged topography and heavily timbered ecology. Compounding those environmental factors, Clayton County both then and now has a relatively small tax base that constrains budgets for the ideal management of its 1100+ miles of county-maintained transportation corridors.

By the 1990's, roadside management in Clayton County had evolved away from annual blanket spraying. A more targeted approach included more aggressive efforts to combat encroaching trees and shrubs, and public opposition to chemical use led to a dramatic decrease in spraying of pesticides. The early years of the program focused heavily on controlling woody plants following an update to county roadside management priorities. The RVMD deployed a comprehensive strategy to get "problem areas" under control – first, a tractor mounted brush mower would knock the vegetation back and improve accessibility for hand crews. The hand crews would then come in and recut, including cut-stump treatment, to prevent regrowth.

With large trees and brush under some degree of control, the RVMD began mowing roadsides from foreslope to ditch bottom every other year using a boom mower.

Around this time the secondary roads department incorporated a regular mowing schedule to its roadside management activities. Each year in June and September, the RVMD mowed right-of-way shoulders during which time spot- mowing of weeds occurred and, if necessary, the location marked on a map for follow-up treatment either mechanical or chemical.

Once control of large trees and brush had been achieved, the RVMD began to expand their operation to include the reconstruction of native plant communities along county transportation corridors. The department used road construction, ditch clean out, and bank sloping projects as opportunities to seed county right-of-way to native vegetation. A cover crop of Timothy or Oats would be applied immediately following the completed project, and the following year a Truax no-till drill would then interseed local ecotype warm- season grasses and forbes.

In the last twenty years, the secondary roads RVMD has updated its strategies, and its equipment in pursuit of more successful, sustainable rehabilitation following disturbances. A hydroseeder was purchased to help with revegetating especially steep areas. Boom mowers, mounted disc grinders, and thumb attachments have allowed for better tree and brush clearance with less work. County policy has been updated to require contracted construction crews to reseed cover crops following their completion of a project. The mowing schedule since been adjusted, and today the department aims for three mowings per year of concrete and seal-chipped transportation routes, and two along gravel transportation corridors. A tractor mower makes the first pass, and a flexible rotary cutter (batwing) for subsequent mowings.

In the winter of 2019-2020, the secondary roads and conservation departments sought to improve on the existing operations to better meet the best practices of IRVM with the development of a formalized IRVM plan.

IRVM Decision Making Process

The roadside manager heads the IRVM decision making process, and reports

to the county engineer. The roadside manager handles the bulk of the decision making, laying out program priorities, as well as handling the budget appropriated by the county board of supervisors and responding to requests or complaints by the public.

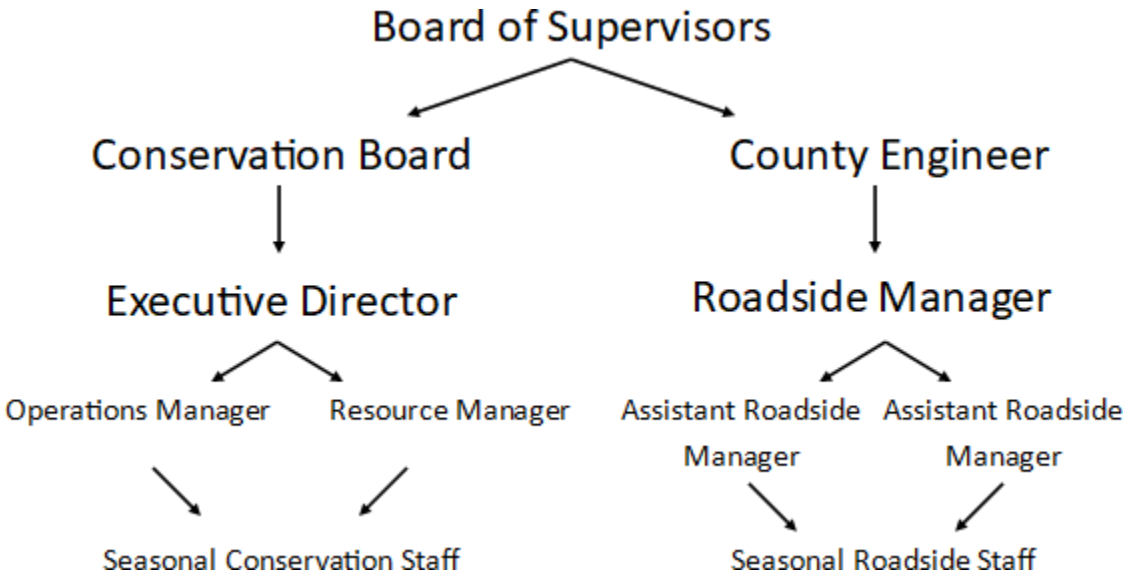
For situations that exceed the department's budget, the roadside manager receives assistance either in the form of budget supplements or grants, from the county engineer.

The county conservation department's executive director, operations manager, and resource manager provide consultation and input, additional manpower, and grant writing assistance according to the needs of the roadside vegetation management department.

Program Type

The IRVM program is housed within the County Engineer/Secondary Roads department.

Organizational Structure



Clayton County's IRVM structure starts with the county board of supervisors who approves the IRVM plan. The supervisors are elected to four-year terms by the public and serving as the Clayton County legislative body. At the next

level, the organizational hierarchy breaks into a close and communicative relationship between two separate departments, the conservation department, and the county engineer. The board of supervisors appoints the county engineer, and the members of the county conservation board.

The county engineer hires and supervises the roadside manager, who manages the IRVM budget, and lays out the day-to-day and long-term goals, activities, and priorities of the IRVM program. The roadside manager oversees all field operations, including mowing, seeding, brush clearance, and weed treatments. The roadside manager also hires and supervises two assistant roadside managers, as well as seasonal help for mowing, seeding, and weed treatments. Secondary roads staff assists with brush clearance and treatment during the fall and winter.

The conservation board hires the executive director, who in turn hires and supervises the operations and resource managers. The executive director, along with the operations and resource managers, provide technical input and consultation, and assistance with grant writing. The operations and resource managers, as instructed by the executive director, may provide assistance to the roadside manager with manpower as well for projects including but not limited to prescribed burns, brush clearance, and herbicide application along county owned right-of-way. The resource manager assists with inventory and monitoring of sensitive species (as identified by the US Fish & Wildlife Service and the Iowa DNR), native plantings, and maintenance schedules. The executive director hires seasonal staff, who assist with day-to-day operations as directed by the managers.

Board of Supervisors Statement of Approval

July 14, 2020

Meeting of the Clayton County Board of Supervisors at 600 Gunder Road NE, Elkader, Iowa.
Present: Steve Doeppke, Sharon Keehner and Ray Peterson
Guests -- In Person: Mike Tschirgi, Myron Phelps, Rafe Koopman, Jenna Pollock, Kenny Slocum;
Electronic: Chad Werger, Terry Puelz

Keehner moved, Doeppke seconded to approve the minutes of the July 7, 2020 meeting. Ayes: Doeppke, Keehner and Peterson. Motion carried.

Doeppke moved, Keehner seconded to approve the claims as presented totaling $63,585.98. Ayes: Doeppke, Keehner and Peterson. Motion carried.

Keehner moved, Doeppke seconded to approve and place on file the report of fees for April through June 2020 for the following: Auditor, $128.18; Recorder, $38,469.51; Sheriff, $31,221.06. Ayes: Doeppke, Keehner, Peterson. Motion carried.

County Engineer Rafe Koopman, Conservation Director Jenna Pollock, and Naturalist Kenny Slocum presented a revised Clayton County Integrate Roadside Vegetation Management Plan. Doeppke moved, Keehner seconded approve the Clayton County Integrate Roadside Vegetation Management Plan. Ayes: Doeppke, Keehner and Peterson. Motion carried.

Attest:

_____
Ray Peterson
Chairperson, Board of Supervisors

_____
Jennifer Garms
Clayton County Auditor

Iowa Code and Administrative Rules-State Laws and Regulations
The Clayton County IRVM program adheres to a number of state laws and regulations including but not limited to

1. Chapter 314.22 Integrated Roadside Management
2. Chapter 317 Iowa Noxious Weed Law
3. Chapter 318 Obstructions of the Right-of-Way
4. Clayton County No Spray Agreement (appendix)

Partners

Clayton County Pheasants Forever – provide technical support, seed, and volunteerism
Turkey River Recreational Corridor – public relations, possible grant writing assistance
Turkey River Watershed Management Authority – technical support, possible grant writing assistance
Clayton County Conservation Awareness Network – volunteerism, public relations

Inventory, Analysis, and Natural Resources

Clayton County's roadside vegetation management department has never performed a formal roadside vegetation inventory. However, the department does maintain a map documenting the location of sensitive habitats (i.e. Talus- Algific slopes), sensitive species (i.e. Northern Monkshood), and no-spray zones as requested by the public or determined by the department.

Possible future improvements on this front may include the digitization of those maps, along with a more thorough floristic inventory with assistance from the secondary roads GIS specialist and county conservation resource manager.

Aerial photography of the entire county is obtained every 5 years. The most recent photos were taken in April of 2018.

Roadsides

The roadside vegetation management department has jurisdiction over more than 1100 miles of roadsides. In a county with considerable acreage of farmland, much of which exists on steep and rugged topography, the county roadside resource offers a significant opportunity to intercept nonpoint pollutants including fertilizer

and sediment. With the long-term climate forecast for Iowa predicting increased precipitation generally, and an increase particularly in heavy precipitation events, the management of transportation routes will play critical role in determining the impact of those changes on area soils and water.

The same environmental factors – widespread conversion to agriculture, and rugged topography – make the establishment and maintenance of quality wildlife habitat a challenge. Therefore, native grasses and forbs along transportation routes offers a comparatively simple, large-scale opportunity to improve the conditions and connectivity for wildlife including pollinators, birds, and herptiles.

Watersheds

Clayton County lies within the watersheds of three major tributaries to the Mississippi River. Much of the south central and southeastern portion of the county drain into the Volga River, which in turn drains into the Turkey River. Much of the northern portion of the county drains also into the Turkey River.

The Turkey River Watershed Management Authority formed in 2012 in response to repeated, costly flooding events within the watershed. The authority developed a watershed resiliency plan, which seeks to improve water quality and flood resiliency within the Turkey River watershed.

Clayton County enjoys several water bodies of ecological and recreational significance. Stocked coldwater trout streams include Buck Creek, Joy Springs, Bloody Run, Mossy Glen Creek, The Upper Maquoketa River, Bear Creek, Sny Magill Creek, and North & South Cedar Creeks. Bloody Run, Baron Springs, Mossy Glen Creek, Spring Creek, and Brownfield Creek are designed Iowa Outstanding Waters by the Iowa DNR, so noted for their exceptional water quality. The trout streams and outstanding waterways are of particular significance to the IRVM program due to their sensitivity to hydrological changes and pollutants within their respective watersheds.

Additionally, the Turkey and Volga rivers flow through Clayton County. The latter joins the former near Garber, Iowa, which five miles later empties into the Mississippi river. Both rivers are major attractions for recreational tourism, and both have seen significant degradation over the last half century as changes in land cover, agricultural practices, and climate have altered their chemistry and sedimentation/erosion regimes.

Unique Geomorphological Considerations

Clayton County lies within the Paleozoic plateau, a unique geomorphological context in the state of Iowa. The Paleozoic plateau is characterized by rugged topography, exposed bedrock, thin soils, and karst including algific talus slopes.

Karst topography underlies most of Clayton County. Karst refers to a landscape of sedimentary rock riddled with caves, sinkholes, and other geologic features whereby materials from the surface can easily disappear into the ground. In a karst landscape, pollutants can often more easily travel from the surface to a water body or penetrate groundwater resources, highlighting the special importance of IRVM in Clayton County for the improvement of water quality.

Algific talus slopes are a special element of Clayton County's karst topography. Algific talus slopes play host to a variety of threatened, endangered, and rare species. During the Wisconsinian glaciation of the last ice age, creatures like the Pleistocene snail, Northern Monkshood, Canada Yew and Witch Hazel were widespread along the edge of the Laurentide ice sheet as it advanced through what is now the northern United States. A combination of geologic factors diverted the ice around the Paleozoic plateau of Northeast Iowa and Southeast Minnesota, and the associated Driftless area of Wisconsin and Northwestern Illinois. Thus, the Paleozoic plateau stood out as an island within the ice sheet, allowing a distinct population of plants and animals to evolve comprised of similar species to those found advancing and retreating with the ice sheet.

As the climate warmed, the melting ice flowed across the Paleozoic plateau, incising steep and deep valleys in the comparatively soft rock strata consisting of mainly limestone and dolomites. The steep hillsides and cave-forming bedrock gave rise to algific-talus slopes. On north-facing hillsides, vents connect by cavities in the rock to sinkholes on the uplands. Rain and snowmelt drip into the cavity, and then freeze in the winter to form large blocks of ice. In the summer, air drawn into the cave network flows over the block of ice and blows out of vents in the hillside, creating conditions where on even the hottest days the area near the slope's surface remains at 50-54°f.

By maintaining these considerably cooler temperatures, these slopes are able to host "living fossils," animals and plants who are relics of the ice age and

exist nowhere else in the state, or in some cases, nowhere else on earth.

These habitats deserve special consideration for an IRVM plan. The dynamics and thermal gradients created by shade trees, the necessary buffer zones around sinkholes, and federally or state listed species of concern inform and may alter the vegetation management strategies deployed near and within these areas.

While many of these sites are signed on the ground, or labeled on maps utilized by roadside vegetation staff, recognizing the indicator species and habitat conditions where they may be present is paramount to responsible roadside management.

Soils

The soils of Clayton County are thin, comprised mainly of silty loams overlying clay, sand, gravel, or bedrock. This presents special challenges to IRVM, as often the same operations that disturb a site and open up space for replanting – ditch clearing, culvert replacements, transportation system repairs, etc. – remove the most productive layers of soil.

When possible, the program should use soil amendments or fertilization alongside native plantings to enhance the probability of success.

Erosion Issues

Clayton County's right-of-ways have a unique susceptibility to erosion compared with many other parts of the state. A largely agricultural land cover means for much of the year – mid-fall through early spring – very little plant material exists to intercept the runoff during high precipitation events. During heavy rains or exceptional snowmelt, large volumes of sediment may be stripped from the surrounding landscape and deposited in area roadsides.

Topography compounds this issue as steep drainage patterns concentrate runoff as large volumes of water in comparatively small places. Rapidly filling road ditches, dry runs, creeks, and rivers can threaten new plantings or wipe out critical infrastructure.

Wildlife

Clayton County lies along an important migration corridor, the Mississippi Flyway, utilized by millions of migrating birds and insects, including endangered species like the Monarch Butterfly each spring and fall.

Native plants for foraging, and wetlands for stopover sights, form the critical infrastructure for wildlife along these routes. IRVM takes notice of these needs, and utilizes transportation system resources as an opportunity to connect habitats and maintain ecological integrity along their journey.

Special Road Designations

The Great River Road Scenic Byway and the River Bluffs Scenic Byway both traverse Clayton County.

Equipment

hydroseeder

broadcast seeder

grain drill

full batwing mower

seed drill

2 boom mowers

excavator mounted brush cutter with thumb attachment

Tractor mounted pull-behind brush mower

Can-Am Defender

Utility tractor

ATV sprayer

Sprayer truck

Annual Operations

January **–** Roadside Manager presents annual report to county supervisors
March-April – Prescribed burns
Mid-May **–** Bareground and guardrail treatments
Memorial Day **–** Commence mowing of all county roadsides
Middle August **–** Batwing mowing
September - October **–** Spray brush
November-February – Brush cutting and treatments

Work Area Types

Rural: adjacent to conventional row crops - pesticide applications permissible, but sensitive to drift
Rural: adjacent to organic - no pesticide application
Rural: landowner requested no-spray - landowner responsible for noxious weed removal
Rural: adjacent to timber - brush cutting, foliar/cut-stump/frilling treatments for problem brush
Urban: adjacent to residence, business, or public building - possible landowner encroachment of ROW, sensitive to pesticide drift

Vegetation Types

Clayton County IRVM currently uses waterway mix (smooth brome, tall fescue, rye grass) in situations where the program has met difficulty in establishing native seedlings. Going forward, the county should explore options for seed mixes better adapted to poorly-drained soils.

Construction projects taking place at times less optimal for native seeding make use of cover crops, typically winter rye in the fall and winter or clover and alfalfa in the spring.

Safety

Safety is a primary concern for roadside staff and motorists. The Roadside Manager, Operations Manager, and Resource Manager all maintain certified pesticide applicator licensures and prescribed fire training to better equip them for safe conduction of vegetation management activities.

Methods

Vegetation Establishment

Seedings typically take place incidentally in response to roadside maintenance. Sites are prepared by the chemical or mechanical removal of vegetation.

- **Seed Mixes**

Waterway mix is applied at a rate of 20-30 lbs per square acre.

- **Techniques**

Seeding techniques include drill seeding when terrain permits, and hydroseeding for steeper slopes. Broadcast seeding by hand occurs where neither technique is viable or the site is very small. Where erosion is a concern, mulch or erosion control matting may be applied to retain moisture and prevent the loss of seed.

- **Erosion & Sediment Control**

Rock dams provide erosion and sediment control on steeper slopes with sufficiently large ROW. Mulch tubes and erosion control matting are also deployed where practical.

- **Maintenance**

Vegetation maintenance includes mowing to discourage noxious weed encroachment, and spot treating of invasive plants.

- **Evaluations and Documentation**

Plantings locations are plotted by hand on a paper map for seeding and followup maintenance.

- **Mowing**

Mowing takes place during the summer, beginning after Memorial Day.

- **Chemical Control**

Noxious weeds and brush receive treatment in the early spring or fall with 2/4/D and glyphosate. Bare ground treatments utilize Oust (sulfometuron- methyl) In the late spring.

- **Tree & Brush Control**

Trees and brush are controlled using an excavator-mounted brush cutter with a thumb attachment, or hand tools where heavy equipment cannot reach. Woody plants receive a cut-stump treatment of Tordon (picloram).

- **Prescribed Burning**

Prescribed burning takes place in the early spring before major nesting activity is underway.

- **Burn Plans & Records**

Burn plans and records are maintained as paper records by the Roadside Manager.

Maintenance

Maintenance work is outlined in the early spring. A living document of sensitive species and noxious weeds guides this process.

- **Seed Mixes**

Disturbed sites are planted to a waterway mix at a rate of 20-30 lbs per square acre due to the speed and ease of establishment, and the historical difficulty in establishing native vegetation following the removal of topsoil by roadside maintenance.

- **Techniques**

Seed is applied via drill seeding, hydroseeding, or hand broadcast depending on the terrain and size of the site.

- **Erosion & Sediment Control**

Sediment is removed as part of the typical schedule of roadside maintenance when accumulation begins to impact drainage features or the natural hydrology of the roadside. Erosion control matting, mulch tubes, and rock

dams are also deployed where practical.

- **Maintenance**

Maintenance consists of spot treatment or mechanical removal of invasive plants or brush, and prescribed burns for established plantings every 3-5 years.

- **Evaluation and Documentation**

Plantings are documented as paper records maintained by the Roadside Manager.

- **Mowing**

Mowing takes place throughout the summer. Secondary roads aims to mow the entirety of county ROW each year when weather, staff, and conditions permit.

- **Chemical Control**

Broadleaf control is primarily achieved with the use of 2/4/D or Triclopyr herbicides. Bare ground treatments use Oust (sulfometuron-methyl).

- **Tree & Brush Control**

Brush control is achieved as cut-stump treatment using Tordon (picloram).

- **Prescribed Burning**

Prescribed fire occurs on a weather-dependent basis every 3-5 years on seedings or high-quality remnant areas.

Material Procurement

Erosion control materials typically come from Stetson Building Products out of Dubuque, IA. Seeding materials typically come from Hall Roberts Son, Inc. out of Postville, IA.

Material Handling & Storage

Chemicals are handled and applied either by, or under the supervision of certified pesticide applicators (Roadside Manager, Resource Manager).

Chemicals and seed are stored in climate-controlled facilities at the Clayton County Secondary Roads shop in Elkader, IA.

Research Questions

What fertilization or soil amendment strategies best improve the success of native plantings?
Clayton County's IRVM program struggles with poor soil conditions stemming from the scouring or removal of productive topsoil. Finding a cost-effective and practical method for incorporating soil improvements would enhance the ability to restore native flora.

Which roadsides should be targeted to mitigate flooding and erosion issues?
Clayton County struggles with flooding issues during major rainfall events. Many native plant species provide better erosion control and water infiltration than non-native plantings, but resources for their installation are limited. Hydrologic mapping would help create a more targeted approach to maximize the efficiency of the IRVM program.

Annual Budget Process

The county engineer and conservation's executive director provide budget proposals to the county supervisors in February of each year. The county engineer determines the proposal for the roadside vegetation program.
County supervisors set the budget dependent on available revenues for the fiscal year with a public hearing in March.

Prior Year Budget Summary

The roads and transportation budget for fiscal year 2019 $6,836,053. The conservation budget for fiscal year 2019 was $526,933.

Current Year Budget Summary

The roads and transportation budget for fiscal year 2020 was $7,153,088 The conservation budget for fiscal year 2020 was $534,765

Conclusion

The Clayton County roadside program began in 1990 with the goal of improving the condition and safety of Clayton County roadsides. The program is strengthened today by a sincere pride in maintaining county roadsides, and a commitment to continuing to expand the knowledge and strategies available. A closer relationship between the secondary roads and conservation departments has already improved the prospects for roadside vegetation, as evidenced by the creation of this very document.

It is the development and continuation of that relationship that will allow Clayton County's IRVM program to become even more successful. The greatest barrier to more successful native plantings along Clayton County roadsides has been limitations of staff and time. With the opportunity to assist across departments, the program will be able to take on a larger workload and further enhance the habitat value and ecological function of roadsides throughout the county.

Appendices

NO SPRAY AGREEMENT

This agreement shall be between Landowner/Tenant _____ and Clayton County Roadside Management for the purpose of restricting the use of herbicides on county right of ways adjacent to property maintaining Certified Organic Farm status.

Landowner/Tenant agrees to remove woody vegetation and noxious weeds from adjacent right of way in a timely manner.

Landowner/Tenant is responsible for installing and maintaining signs designating the no spray zone. All signs shall read NO SPRAY and be legible to traffic on the road. Signs shall be installed at each end and along the property at intervals of not more than 500 feet.

This agreement does not allow for use of the right of way as a buffer strip as required for organic certification.

Landowner/Tenant will still be responsible for control of noxious weeds on their property as provided by the Iowa Weed Law (Chapter 317) Code of Iowa.

Clayton County reserves the right to use traditional methods to control undesirable vegetation if these terms are not met, thus voiding this agreement

Clayton County assumes no liability for damages to vegetation, property or personal injury as a result of this agreement.

Location of No Spray Zone

Township_____

Section _____

Road _____

Address (911) _____

No Spray Description_____

_____

Landowner/Tenant_____ Date_____

Roadside Manager_____ Date_____

Clayton County No Spray Agreement

Area Map of Clayton County Roadways