

# Roadside Vegetation Q&A

## Why is the DOT replacing plants that seem to be healthy and look nice?

The DOT is in the process of replanting all the roadsides on state primary highways to native grasses and wildflowers. While the existing vegetation may look nice, it is not functioning as well as needed for roadside purposes such as erosion control, water infiltration or weed competition. The DOT currently spends nearly \$3 million each year to clean ditches, remove silt, and spray and mow weeds. The DOT believes the native vegetation, once established, will provide sufficient benefits and reduced maintenance costs to warrant replacing the existing vegetation.



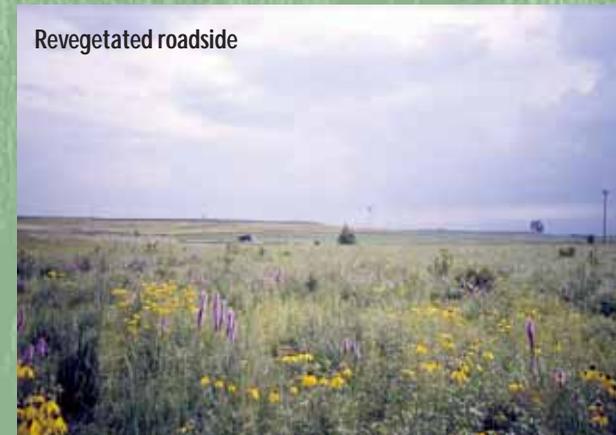
## What makes roadside planting a good investment?

Iowa's Primary Road Fund is where the DOT gets money for these projects. This money comes from the taxes collected on fuel, the sale of motor vehicles, and other tax sources related to transportation. Iowa law mandates this fund be spent only on highway improvements. The DOT has determined this investment will provide long-term cost savings to the citizens of Iowa.

## What are the benefits of native vegetation?

The benefits of native vegetation include:

- increased water infiltration due to more extensive root systems;
  - *minimized stormwater runoff*
  - *reduced pollution to streams*
- improved erosion control, after native vegetation has established;
- improved habitat for birds, butterflies, skippers and other wildlife;
  - *roadsides function as corridors between larger natural areas*
  - *for pollination, some native species require a specific insect or skipper species found in roadside corridors*



- enhanced motorist safety;
  - *reduced blowing snow, which interferes with visibility*
  - *reduced snow glare because many native species remain standing in the winter, breaking up the snow's reflective surface*
  - *greater visual stimulation for drivers from variation in colors, sizes and textures, which helps reduce sleepiness from "highway hypnosis"*
- a more aesthetically pleasing roadside; and
- reduced long-term maintenance costs.
  - *less fertilizing, mowing and spraying needed*
  - *captured snow that might otherwise blow or drift onto the road*

## Root Systems of Prairie Plants



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## Vegetation traps snow and provides winter cover for wildlife



## What is special about native plants?

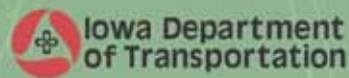
The plants being used for roadside revegetation are prairie species native to Iowa. These species are well adapted to Iowa's climate, insects and diseases, having evolved in this region. Many of the species are warm-season, which means they have a special mechanism to keep growing during the hot Iowa summers when cool-season plants go into dormancy. The native species have deep root systems that help them tolerate drought and compete for soil nutrients. It is these characteristics that provide many of the benefits to roadsides.



(Above) Monarch butterflies on Rough Blazingstar;  
(below) Big Bluestem



For more information contact:



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First year -  
eliminating plant competition



First/second year's growth



Third to fifth year's growth

## What is the process to replant the roadsides?

The first phase eliminates existing, competing vegetation. This is done by mowing, then spraying the regrowth with glyphosate herbicide. While this process leaves the roadside looking barren for one season, it is necessary for the long-term establishment of new plants. Once the competing plants have been eliminated, the roadsides are seeded with native grasses and wildflowers. On each revegetation project, the DOT is using anywhere from three to 10 grass species, mixed with a variety of forb species. Each project will have seed mixes designed specifically for the conditions of that project. For the first two years these roadsides will be mowed periodically to reduce weed competition, promote germination and develop deeper root systems for healthier vegetation. After the third year of planting, minimal maintenance should be required.

## Can I be assured that the new seedings will not bring invasive weeds?

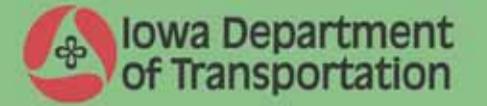
The native grass and wildflower seed is tested for purity in the same way any other commercial seed is tested in Iowa. This process is regulated by the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship and Iowa Crop Improvement Association. The DOT inspects the seed tags to make sure the testing was done.

## Does the DOT have jurisdiction over all Iowa roadsides?

The Iowa DOT has jurisdiction only over the state's primary highways and interstates, including the roadsides. Counties and cities have jurisdiction over the county and city roads and roadsides.

## What is our "good neighbor" philosophy?

The DOT approach to roadside management is underscored by a "good neighbor" philosophy directed toward our adjoining landowners. If the right-of-way in front of your home or business is currently being maintained as a lawn, it will not be revegetated. Because of liability concerns, the Iowa Code requires a permit to be obtained to mow, hay or perform other activities in the state's right-of-way. In some instances, where it is determined by the department to be beneficial to plant growth, the DOT will issue permits for occasional mowing or haying of well-established revegetated areas.



# Roadside Vegetation



**Answers to your  
questions about the  
Iowa Department of Transportation's  
roadside vegetation program**