

Integrated Vegetation Management Today: We Need More

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We've Come So Far, But We Can Go Further

Integrated vegetation management (IVM) is one of our industry's largest trends. It is also one of the most commonly used terms in utility vegetation management (UVM) today. Most members of our industry say they practice it, but it is a relatively recent phenomenon that originated within agricultural integrated pest management (IPM) efforts.

In retrospect, IPM was a much-needed trend that helped all pest management approaches be safer, more focused, more effective, and more appreciative of beneficial pests—versus bad actor “pest” organisms—that the effort had been tackling. Regarding insect control, both indoor and outdoor applications prioritized pest management versus pest eradication. It was overdue in the evolution and creation of diverse tools and their correct use in agricultural, horticultural, landscape, turf, indoor pest control, forestry, and vegetation management (VM) arenas.

Today, countless utilities and their partners across the country are focusing on IVM. Many have already implemented IVM programs which are being executed throughout their service territories. Properly implemented, these programs are achieving great things: property owners are welcoming crews and understanding their importance and benefits, VM leaders can more effectively manage invasive species, and VM programs are becoming stronger and more manageable. Despite these results, it's critical that we—as an industry—continue to take our knowledge of and approach to IVM to the next level.



Thickets should require a selective herbicide mix and/or a more precise application.



We can be more selective with our herbicide mixes and our application methods.

Go From Practicing to Perfecting IVM

It is important to understand that integrating and including a number of mechanical, chemical, biological, and cultural vegetation control options is only *practicing* IVM. *Perfecting* IVM is an ongoing, dynamic process of refining and elevating objectives to pursue excellence in all IVM facets. The industry must shift toward adopting this process.

We cannot be satisfied with minimal mechanical clearing approaches, a single terrestrial, a single aquatic low-volume foliar mix, or a one-size-fits-all approach. Prescription control must address and deliver more selective, site-specific brush control and ecological benefits.

To meet our goals, our internal and external communications and messaging need improvement. All utility employees should understand and support proper urban and rural rights-of-way (ROW) land management pursuits. Our planning and implementation processes must transcend the spend or committed mile quota success orientation to deliver sustainable, diverse, and desirable plant communities. We can develop ecological solutions that promote beneficial vegetation, rather than focusing exclusively on brush control.

Selective techniques, mixes, and beneficial results would upgrade IVM application if we had a renewed focus on delivering appropriate training. In regional climates, collateral damage should be reviewed to quantify the benefits of selectivity. Tree pruning and removal, as well as stump treatment practices, remain essential and can always be improved. We need to seek excellence and not fall victim to complacency. Our entire industry should be *all-in!*

With the front end of IVM stealing our focus, the bidding and percent control has taken away from the monitor treatments and quality assurance aspects. Wise spending is important, but we can improve brush control and choose to create a lower impact on plant desirables through scope of work, training, plant identification, and auditing. We should reward better treatments and emphasize crew expertise and more plant identification (desirables compared to undesirables), which would help



This is a good example of controlling the undesirable species while maintaining the desirable species.

develop precise, selective measures based directly on species and density—including difficulties in treating thickets. We can streamline the various control recommendations for more specific, usable, and prescribed practices—not just one blanket mix.

Prioritize and Learn Best Practices

So, how should we proceed? If you don't own a copy of *Best Management Practices: Integrated Vegetation Management* by Randall Miller, get it. Read it. Share it. Quote it. The back end of the process requires a dynamic review and tweaking for continuous improvement, which can boost IVM towards a brighter future.

Our jobs are difficult and the government recognizes us as essential workers. Oftentimes, weariness may sneak in, but maintaining our fervor for improvement and achieving goals can reinvigorate all of us. Share BMP copies within your VM group, know the IVM flow chart by heart and use it, and push to continuously raise both the IVM bar and IVM industry IQ. Look to those in your industry who possess motivation and enthusiasm and try to follow their example.



This reference is the backbone of the IVM process. Everyone should have a copy.

Additional resource materials that I strongly recommend are the *Best Management Practices (BMP) - Utility Pruning of Trees* by Geoff Kempter and the *UAA BMP Closed Chain of Custody for Herbicide* by John Goodfellow and Harvey Holt. You can utilize the objectives in these materials for your program to be greener. Environmental stewardship is based solidly on IVM principles. We are essential workers, and better IVM decisions are the driving force for improving our VM processes. Don't think you've got it whipped. We can all do better. Thank you and be safe in all you do!