



Hidden Values of the ROW Stewardship Accreditation

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One of our greatest opportunities to expand the Right-Of-Way (ROW) Stewardship Accreditation is communicating the value of accreditation relative to the costs. There are the obvious costs of the accreditation fees and reimbursing the auditors, and the more subtle costs of making lasting changes to your ROW vegetation management program to meet the necessary certification criteria. So, how do we show the value exceeds the costs? One advantage of the accreditation is that benefits are determined, documented and verified by a non-biased independent auditor team. The auditors' recommendation is then approved by the council, which is made up of stakeholders representing all impacted by ROW vegetation management practices – including private citizens.

So, what kind of truthful marketing claims can be made by accredited utilities? There is certainly the traditional benefit and savings of a well-run integrated vegetation management (IVM) program, which can lead to reduction in maintenance costs by establishing a compatible plant community. There are also environmental benefits by increasing plants that attract pollinators. These aims are at the core of the ROW Steward Accreditation.

I would like to highlight some rarely discussed benefits of accreditation by reviewing three of the five principles outlined in the ROW Stewardship Council's *Accreditation Standards for Assessing IVM Excellence*.

PRINCIPLE #1: COMPLIANCE WITH LAWS, STANDARDS AND BEST MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

Laws and regulations are developed to protect natural resources and their associated benefits to society. IVM practitioners must demonstrate an awareness of and engagement in practices that comply with all laws and regulations and meet or exceed guidelines related to vegetation management on ROW and the safety of vegetation management workers.

One of the criteria under this principle is that personnel are educated, trained, licensed or supervised in accordance with applicable regulations and best management practices (BMPs). **ROW Stewards assure that vegetation management program personnel are appropriately trained, licensed and supervised.** A well trained and educated workforce leads to better production, fewer safety incidents, improved retention, fewer claims and improved public relations.

PRINCIPLE #3: COMMUNITY RELATIONS

IVM programs provide outreach to affected communities and other affected stakeholders.

One of the real values of the ROW Steward Accreditation is the positive and verifiable public relations opportunities created by adoption of this principle. Criteria under this principle include:

- Public Education – Stakeholders are apprised of the ROW Stewardship program, IVM practices and resulting benefits. **ROW Stewards help their communities and neighbors understand why and how they use IVM to manage ROW.**
- Internal Stakeholder Engagement – The IVM plan is based in part on interdisciplinary collaboration with other departments within the organization that can provide relevant support. **Internal collaboration leads to an integrated approach to vegetation management.**
- External Stakeholder Engagement – Management planning, including the development of management objectives, considers the societal impact of planned activities. The input of appropriate stakeholder groups interested in or affected by ROW IVM is welcomed and considered when developing management objectives. Consideration of stakeholder input is an essential component of IPM/IVM. **ROW Stewards actively seek to engage stakeholders in consideration of the societal and community impact of vegetation management activities.**

PRINCIPLE #5: UNDERSTANDING PEST AND ECOSYSTEM DYNAMICS

The ability to identify both incompatible and compatible vegetation, plant communities in the managed system, and understand the effects of various IVM methods based on knowledge of pest life histories and ecosystem processes is foundational knowledge for vegetation managers and vegetation management workers.

This principle has multiple criteria but what shouldn't be overlooked is commitment to research, development, and demonstration (RD&D). RD&D activities such as field trials should be supported (and/or engaged in directly) to provide an opportunity to enhance understanding and knowledge of the ecology of the managed ROW, and to support continuous improvement. **ROW Stewards are committed to supporting research and demonstration activities that enhance understanding of the ecology of the managed system.**

When these principles were developed, marketing claims were attached to each criterion. The claims bolded in this article are only a few of the advantages of the around 50 marketing claims for the ROW Steward Accreditation that can be documented and verified by obtaining the credential.

While the actual value would vary for each utility, there is no question that the value included in being ROW Stewardship Accredited outweighs the costs.

<http://www.rowstewardship.org>

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