Designing a New Infrastructure Land Stewardship Certification

In 2023, a group of stakeholders who work in the utility and transportation industries, including representatives from universities, industry associations, contractors and consultants, an electric utility, a department of transportation, conservation groups, and chemical companies, convened around the idea of creating a voluntary certification program focused on protecting and enhancing biodiversity on energy and transportation lands. This effort is in the early stages of scoping and this document provides an overview of what the group envisions.

What is the Infrastructure Land Stewardship Certification?

This voluntary certification program aims to create an industry standard and recognize expertise in vegetation management practices that protect and enhance vegetation with the goal of improving biodiversity on energy and transportation lands, while simultaneously delivering exemplary operational and ecological outcomes.

Who is it for?

The certification professionalizes individuals who perform vegetation management activities (e.g., inspections, mowing, herbicide applications, monitoring, etc.) on rights-of-way (e.g., roadsides, utility corridors, etc.) and other energy and transportation lands. This certification distinguishes individuals who have the expertise to perform land stewardship and biodiversity-oriented vegetation management practices, unlike other certifications that target a specific project location (e.g., Wildlife Habitat Council certifications) and/or an organization's vegetation management program as a whole (e.g., Right-of-Way Stewardship Council accreditation).

Why is this certification needed?

The United Nations identifies biodiversity and habitat loss as one of our largest planetary crises, alongside climate change and pollution. Current U.S.[1] and global targets aim to protect 30% of the land and sea for nature by 2030. With more than 40 million acres of energy and transportation rights-of-way in the continental U.S. alone (about half the total land area of the entire national park system), the management of energy and transportation lands to promote biodiversity and habitat resources is an important step towards meeting the 30% target by 2030. In addition, the expansive network of rights-of-way offers some unique characteristics that benefit landscape conservation efforts. These linear tracts intersect a variety of landscapes, connect remnant habitats to other favorable environments, and are generally safe from major disturbances or future development. However, without skilled management, rights-of-way can alternatively become devoid of beneficial vegetation, treated to the point of being "browned out," or corridors for the spread of invasive plant species.

[1] See President Biden's Executive Order on Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad, dated 27 January 2021: https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/27/executive-order-on-tackling-the-climate-crisis-at-home-and-abroad/

To address these concerns and advance the energy and transportation industries towards these goals, this certification:

- Provides career advancement opportunities to individuals who have the knowledge and skills to perform land stewardship and biodiversity-oriented vegetation management practices
- Protects and enhances the vegetation management profession's body of knowledge, particularly where it relates to managing for compatible[2], beneficial plant species on energy and transportation lands
- Promotes the implementation of vegetation management practices that benefit species richness, while maintaining safe, reliable, and cost-effective operations
- Provides environmental stewardship credibility to organizations who employ certified individuals and those who contract with them
- Recognizes the importance of regional ecological knowledge in managing vegetation on energy and transportation lands
- Addresses an industry-recognized gap in the number of qualified professionals who can perform land stewardship and biodiversity-oriented vegetation management practices
- Provides a mechanism for energy and transportation organizations to specify land stewardship and biodiversity-oriented vegetation management in their contracts
- Helps energy and transportation organizations scale up biodiversity-oriented vegetation management across their systems and minimize the negative impacts their management actions can have on wildlife habitat

What are the next steps? How to get involved?

The task force is seeking funding to support the development of the certification program, including program standards, technical training content, exam preparation, and program administration, in addition to identifying potential host organizations. Additional task force members with expertise in developing credentialing programs or other relevant technical knowledge are invited to participate. Once the program scope and funding are secured, the task force anticipates advertising a Request for Proposal for completion of the program design work. The goal is to have the fully established certification program ready to launch by 2026.

If you are interested in supporting or participating in this effort, please contact branchout@growwithtrees.com.

[2] Compatible plant species are those that are consistent with the intended use of site (e.g., do not interfere with energy or transportation infrastructure, nor pose a safety or reliability issue).