

# gROWing Chicago

## Introduction

The design and maintenance of utility and transportation lands can be crucial to the creation and conservation of habitat and ecosystem resources for various species. These rights-of-way (ROW) and working lands can offer greater refugia than the surrounding areas and may serve as connections between habitats across fragmented landscapes. Criss-crossing the United States, ROW are managed to support the growth of early successional habitats, a vegetation management strategy that is well-suited to create and sustain nectar resources. The compatibility of these maintenance techniques has encouraged the use of Integrated Vegetation Management (IVM) to promote the presence of beneficial vegetation on ROW that can support at-risk species, such as insect pollinators, that are threatened due to habitat loss. As a result, there has been a renewed interest in collaborations between conservation agencies and transportation and utility companies to utilize ROWs and other transportation lands for habitat conservation.

In the Chicago area, cross-agency partnerships between nature centers, forest preserves, other conservation entities, utility companies, solar developers, highway agencies, and railroad companies have supported various scales of habitat building, conservation, and restoration projects.

## Purpose

This project aims to connect conservation groups, public and private landowners, and utility and transportation organizations (ROW organizations) to identify opportunities for collaboration and support habitat conservation on ROWs and other utility and transportation lands across the Chicago region.

To achieve this, the project will:

- 1. Establish a Chicago-area workgroup composed of ROW organizations and public and private partners in the area.**

A Chicago-area workgroup composed of ROW organizations, conservation partners, and public and private landowners in the area will incentivize future collaborations on habitat ROW. The group will serve as a connection point between ROW managers, partner organizations, and related initiatives across the Chicago region and share updates on projects, challenges, best management practices, and support each other's work. Furthermore, the group will establish a ROW habitat projects and resources database to support information sharing and direct coordination between partners.

- 2. Build a shared resources and standard tools hub to communicate about ROW habitat projects.**

A shared platform to communicate about ROW habitat projects will help ROW organizations share their stories and build broader recognition and support from internal and external stakeholders. A primary focus of this platform will be changing the narratives around ROWs by increasing public awareness of these types of projects, creating collaborative projects story-telling opportunities, and building local and national recognition. ROW organizations could also use these opportunities to build internal support from management teams, vegetation managers, and contractors.

- 3. Establish a prioritization strategy to focus collaborative habitat conservation efforts across the Chicago region.**

The workgroup will build on existing mapping and prioritization efforts by Chicago Wilderness, the Rights-of-Way as Habitat Working Group, Friends of the Chicago River, and other partners to identify priority areas for ROW habitat projects in the region. A collaborative prioritization approach will support the creation and maintenance of habitat through logistical planning, landowner and public buy-in, long-term care, and invasive species management.