

FAX TRANSMITTAL

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Newsletter for Roadsides Decision-Makers

LADY BIRD JOHNSON'S VISION

by David K. Northington, Ph.D., Executive Director, National Wildflower Research Center

Collectively, roadsides provide the largest cross-section of this Nation's natural floristic beauty visible to the public. This regional character, expressed by the native wildflowers and grasses unique to each area of the country, set the course for Lady Bird Johnson nearly three decades ago.

During President Johnson's administration, Mrs. Johnson primarily focused on conservation and environmental issues, building support for national parks, wild land preserves, and natural areas. Her interest included the more visible beautification of Washington, D.C., and our Nation's roadsides. To Mrs. Johnson, the roadsides were most spectacular when they displayed the changing seasonal colors and textures of the wildflowers and grasses indigenous to each region of the country.

To encourage this beauty — and to encourage the protection of native species in her home State — for twenty years Mrs. Johnson personally sponsored awards for Texas Department of Transportation regional staff responsible for roadside maintenance. The program encouraged the protection of existing native species through reduced frequency of mowing, mowing at a higher blade level, and the reestablishment of species that were once common to an area but had disappeared because of over-maintenance.

It has become clear that planting seed and reducing mowing increase the color and, subsequently, the beauty of the roadsides (reason enough for most of us), but that several side benefits are also realized. Reduced mowing lowers roadside vegetation maintenance costs dramatically — up to 75% in Texas, which translates to more than \$1 million per year! Plus, higher mower settings reduce equipment damage and protect passing motorists from flying rocks.

Additionally, in an era of rapidly expanding public environmental awareness, the roadside rights-of-way have become an

important physical link between remaining patches of natural vegetation in many areas of the country. Therefore, natural genetic biodiversity can be enhanced and protected on our rights-of-way through reestablishing native species and protecting the natural habitats they form along our roadsides.



Mrs. Johnson sitting beside one of her many wildflower projects.

The key to such a win-win-win program (aesthetic beauty, economic savings, environmental protection) is a simple two-step process. First, we must change the public expectation (and sometimes DOT inertia

“Earlier this year, Mrs. Johnson came to Washington to visit many people, including Secretary Peña and the Administrator to promote the wildflower program. Her devotion to improving our roadsides and her energy and untiring support for the wildflower program is a true inspiration. Her work shows that our roadsides can be aesthetically pleasing as well as ecological and economical and it is a legacy that will be reflected for generations to come.”

—Jane Garvey, FHWA Deputy Administrator

born of decades of “doing it the same way”) that our Nation's roadsides should be mowed constantly and kept looking like a front yard. A softer, more relaxed, seasonal,

colorful assemblage of native grasses and wildflowers is an easy look to sell if citizens understand it is the maintenance policy, not dereliction of duty.

Second, we must reestablish indigenous native grass and wildflower species and remove aggressive, weedy exotic plants. This will ultimately result in balanced native vegetative communities that approximate what used to exist in natural habitats before they lost out to the “plow and the cow” and development that supports an ever-growing human population.

Expanding regional pride and sensitivity to the delicate ecological balance can result in ready public acceptance of policies that increase regional biodiversity, save tax-supported maintenance budgets, and preserve the “look.” One of Mrs. Johnson's favorite comments is that “Vermont should look like Vermont, California like California, and Texas like Texas.” Of course she means our roadsides should reflect what naturally occurs there; they should not be homogeneous, looking like front yards, or with colorful “wildflowers” that are not native to that particular area.

Different regional looks also bring unique regional issues, such as control of woody vegetation, erosion control, salt accumulation, fire hazards, motorist safety, etc. Resolving these issues is simply a matter of establishing priorities. The primary goal should be to develop a roadside vegetation management and enhancement program that reduces mowing and increases the biodiversity of native grasses and wildflowers while accommodating these other requirements. We can all be encouraged that all areas of the country have successful programs that accomplish just that.

When the goal has such win-win-win possibilities, resolving other issues is easy. Founded by Mrs. Johnson in 1982, the National Wildflower Research Center is committed to encouraging Mrs. Johnson's vision of the natural beauty of this land. Our roadsides are the most important component in creating a legacy of regional beauty in this Nation, and our DOTs are the agents to make this vision come true.

DATE: July 29, 1997
TO: Suzanne Sullivan
FROM: Bonnie Harper-Lore
RE: Background for Austin

BENEFITS of ROADSIDE PROGRAMS: We know what they are, but we have not been able to measure the benefits. In 1993, we sent a survey to get at those very answers. What we discovered was:

1. 28 States who think native wildflowers/grasses and more environmental approaches are valuable, are doing them and not keeping track of costs. I think they know that initial costs are likely to be higher and are cost effective only over the long run. Most programs began in the 80s and have no long run numbers.

2. The other States are beginning to understand the benefits and are moving more slowly. The benefits include:

- a. Reduce maintenance costs by less mowing
- b. Increase wildlife habitat AND biodiversity
- c. Improve erosion control with vegetation
- d. Increase planting successes with regionally hardy plants
- e. Enhance the aesthetics with transition to the natural landscape
- f. Strengthen partnerships with natural resource agencies
- g. Encourage support of adjacent landowners for DOT work (P.R.)
- h. And Suppress noxious weed invasions.
- i. Replace expensive garden approaches, with self reliant native plantings

MRS. JOHNSON STORIES or HISTORICAL INSIGHTS REGARDING 1965, 87, and 93.:

1. In 1965, President Johnson's Conference on Natural Beauty met. It was used to dramatize the most pressing conservation issues of the time. But ultimately the aesthetic, rather than material concerns received emphasis in the President's "new conservation". Although this was not Johnson's original intent, this began the beautification movement, and ultimately the 1965 Beautification Act. It really began as a conservation of natural resources effort. "The beauty of the land is a natural resource. Its preservation is linked to the inner prosperity of the human spirit," said President Johnson on February 8, 1996. "It is true that we have often been careless with our natural bounty. At times we have paid a heavy price for this neglect. But once our people were aroused to the danger, we have acted to preserve our resources for the enrichment of our country and the enjoyment of future generations."

Mrs. Johnson participated and Laurance S. Rockefeller led the panel of experts to report on subjects from highway billboards to automobile junk yards. The 1965 Beautification Act followed.

2. In 1987 Mrs. Johnson invited State Highway Agencies of Arkansas, Michigan, Ohio, Florida, Texas and Minnesota to hold a roadside wildflower/beautification "summit". The State representatives discussed their programs and problems with Mrs. Johnson until 11:00 that night. At breakfast she began to ask the hard questions of WHY more was not being done. The typical response was lack of support from their agency's management level. Mrs. Johnson spent a lot of time before that and after that visiting State Governors and other officials to promote a more environmental approach to highway rights-of-way. Her meetings with Governors and Governor's wives let to increased support of roadside programs in many States.

Most of the States she invited in 1987 remain the most successful roadside stories. Those who visited with Mrs. Johnson came away inspired to try even harder to make roadside changes. 1987 was also the year STURAA required the use of native wildflowers. Mrs. Johnson's friend, Senator Lloyd Bentson, was responsible for that requirement.

3. (In 1993, shortly after Mrs. Johnson's visit to FHWA to get assurance that roadsides were still a priority, David Northington observed the following:) One of her favorite comments has been: "Vermont should look like Vermont, California like California, and Texas like Texas." She means our roadsides should reflect what naturally occurs there; they should not be homogeneous, looking like front yards, or with colorful "wildflowers" that are not native to that particular area.,

Since her visit, the Federal Highway Administration has:

- a. produced two roadside videos showing the environmental work of many States,
- b. held three Wildflower Photo competitions to reward successful roadside programs,
- c. helped promote support for these programs through the quarterly newsletter, *Greener Roadsides*.
- d. funded ____ research and demonstrations of native wildflower use.
- E. Begun production of a use- of- native- plants handbook, due in 1998.