

Natural Resources Management Activities

DeKalb County Forest Preserve District

January 2017

Primary activities during the month of January included:

1. Brush Control. Our brush control efforts are sometimes hampered by heavy snow in January. Not this year! Except for a week of muddy thawing, January 2017 has been a banner year for removal of invasive brush. In some sites, we also removed adventive native trees, such as Cherry and Box Elder, to protect the Oaks and Hickories that have been declining as a result of damage from these fast-growing, shade tolerant competitors. Staff and stewards have been busy at Afton, contractors are working along the Great Western Trail, and staff and a contractor worked this month in Swanson Grove. Our methods include large mechanized mowers, chain saws, pole pruners and lots of enthusiastic help from our stewards. Some of the debris is shredded and left in place, while some is gathered in brush piles and burned. Most of the cleared areas are then “frost seeded” (winter planting) with a specific blend of native seeds appropriate to the soil, moisture and sun/shade conditions.

2. Winter “frost seeding.” Speaking of frost seeding, much of the seed we gathered in 2016 has been mixed with purchased seed and planted in the areas where we removed brush, or where we prepared the soil this past year using herbicide and tillage. We again borrowed an old McCormick drop-seeder from our Nature Conservancy friends at Nachusa Grasslands and used it to plant five acres in the former riparian buffer along the Kishwaukee River in the South Branch Prairie. This site was a solid stand of the dreadfully invasive Reed Canary Grass, a common invader of moist soil sites. It took three years to get the Reed Canary Grass under control, and now, this spring, we should see a fine early stand of *very diverse* native wet-prairie plants. Lots and lots of pollinator species. We will plant at least two acres on the Great Western Trail once the contractors finish their work there.

3. Wetland Bank repairs. The weather this winter has also been good for making repairs to the Afton Wetland Bank. Our contract with the Army Corps of Engineers requires that we maintain the bank and its functions, so when issues like eroding berms, damage from beavers, and impaired outlet structures arise, we get it fixed. While the soil is frozen, our staff and excavation contractor have been busy armoring the low berms in the bank with 6 -10 inch limestone rip-rap. We recently reviewed the final engineering plans for the weir structure replacements in the Ideal Wetland and Phase 3 of the wetland bank. Construction of the weirs should begin early this summer.

4. Interagency cooperation. Josh Clark, our Restoration Ecologist, was recently elected secretary of the Illinois Association of Conservation Districts. This organization of smaller districts gathers members together quarterly to share ideas and methods for restoration, education, recreation and conservation of our publicly held lands and waters. Josh and Al Roloff are helping prepare for the organization’s annual conference which will be held February 16 and 17 at the Starved Rock Conference Center. Also, since we already do much of the same work, we have joined in several specific efforts with the *Openlands* organization and *Chicago Wilderness* to focus collectively on a targeted group of declining species to improve their health and habitat. Al had several meetings and a conference call this month to refine 2017 strategies. Stay tuned for updates regarding mussels, the Smooth Green Snake, and headwaters streams.



Steward Ron Cress tosses a branch in to a burning brush pile at the Afton Preserve.



Ecologist Josh Clark and maintenance technician Dale Harrolle load seed in a drop seeder attached to a UTV before planting five acres of prairie in a former weed patch along the Kishwaukee River.