

**From:** "Rogers, Scott" <[Scott.Rogers@vermont.gov](mailto:Scott.Rogers@vermont.gov)>

**Subject:** RE: A roadside question

**Date:** August 5, 2015 at 11:09:33 AM EDT

**To:** "Tetreault, Richard" <[Richard.Tetreault@vermont.gov](mailto:Richard.Tetreault@vermont.gov)>, 'Maida Townsend' <[mftownsend@comcast.net](mailto:mftownsend@comcast.net)>

**Cc:** "Law, Todd" <[Todd.Law@vermont.gov](mailto:Todd.Law@vermont.gov)>, "Digiammarino, Craig" <[Craig.Digiammarino@vermont.gov](mailto:Craig.Digiammarino@vermont.gov)>

Good morning Rep Townsend,

Your constituent asks a great question and it's a topic that comes up not infrequently. VTrans is well aware of the presence of invasive species within our highway rights of way. And we have been working for years and with other state and federal partners in our efforts to monitor them and hopefully develop strategies to better control them.

Two examples of species we have been watching are Wild Chervil and Wild Parsnip. Both are poisonous plants. Both exist in great abundance and control is very challenging for both plants. In 2010 there was a proposed bill introduced by the legislature to control Wild Parsnip with more frequent mowing. This recommendation actually would have made the problem worse, and we strongly opposed the legislation. With that said similar requests have come to our office for many years about Wild Chervil.

Unfortunately, simply put, we do not have the resources to control any invasive species in our rights-of-ways. Our only real management strategy is mowing, once a year. The first week of June may be a good time to mow and avoid spreading mature seed of Wild Parsnip, but unfortunately that's the absolute worst time to mow Wild Chervil which will be in a mature seed stage of growth.

With over a dozen invasive species in our rights-of-ways that threaten natural plant communities, farm land and personal property the task of invasive plant control is a daunting one to say the least. To be successful we would need significant cooperation from abutting property owners - and this opens up a whole can of worms regarding property rights and property management... not to mention the need for significantly more resources. In other words, it doesn't do any good to control invasive species next to the road if the farm field on the other side of the highway fence is full of them.

Mowing in and of itself can be a hot topic. The Agency of Transportation follows a mowing policy that governs where, when and how we mow on a statewide basis. The policy has been in place since 2008, and balances safety, environmental impacts, and cost. According to the policy, we don't mow until after June 1st annually (used to be July 1st), and we only

mow once per year. The exception is in areas where we have to mow more frequently to maintain sight distance for safety, such as intersections, ramps and gores. Generally speaking, our policy is intended to maintain safe roads and bridges for the traveling public, prevent infrastructure deterioration, reduce costs, reduce energy consumption, reduce greenhouse gas and unhealthy emissions from mowing equipment, protect water quality, wildlife habitat and the roadway's surrounding natural ecology, and preserve the scenic qualities of the highway corridor. Simply put, we try to mow at the appropriate time to balance all the competing interests and meet our strict fiscal constraints. But it's definitely not easy.

One big challenge is the invasive species as I discussed above. Other challenges include balancing the ecological needs of all the "critters" that use the highway right of way as they go about their business. Birds, bees, and others all find valuable habitat along our roadways. A number of folks would prefer that we postpone mowing even longer to allow wildflowers to bloom and go to seed because they benefit our bee population. Typically we start to get complaints about the long grass right around the time we start mowing every year.

Practically no topic is more subject to personal preference (and public opinion) than mowing. In the years before we implemented our policy, we would get dozens of complaints about the long grass until we cut it. Immediately after we cut the grass, we would get dozens of complaints from people who preferred the natural beauty of having the grass long. Even each maintenance district had its own personal preference, so the mowing was not being done the same way or at the same time in different parts of the state. By having a policy to follow, we ensure that we are addressing safety concerns above all else, while considering the other factors like emissions, cost, and the environment. We also ensure that we do things the same throughout the state, while removing personal preferences from the equation.

That's probably more information than you were looking for. Our Maintenance and Operations Environmental Program manager (Craig Digiannarino) is our invasive species guru. He can answer any follow up questions you might have, and he is copied on this email. I hope this helps.

Sincerely,  
Scott

Scott A. Rogers, PE  
Director, Maintenance and Operations Bureau  
Highway Division  
Vermont Agency of Transportation

Please note, as of July 27, 2015 my e-mail address will be: [scott.rogers@vermont.gov](mailto:scott.rogers@vermont.gov)

-----Original Message-----

From: Tetreault, Richard  
Sent: Wednesday, August 05, 2015 10:54 AM  
To: 'Maida Townsend'  
Cc: Rogers, Scott; Law, Todd  
Subject: RE: A roadside question

Hello Representative Townsend,

I am forwarding your question along to our Maintenance & Operations staff who manage the mowing program and certainly have firsthand knowledge of invasive species like wild parsnip. Someone will be in touch soon with the information you request.

Sincerely,

Rich

Richard Tetreault, PE  
Vermont Agency of Transportation  
Director/Chief Engineer Of Highway Division One National Life Drive Montpelier, Vermont  
05633-5001  
(802) 828-2663

-----Original Message-----

From: Maida Townsend [<mailto:mftownsend@comcast.net>]  
Sent: Wednesday, August 05, 2015 9:59 AM  
To: Tetreault, Richard  
Subject: A roadside question

Greetings, Mr. Tetreault. I write you because a constituent contacted me with a question that is at least tangential to highways. Please tell me whom I should really contact on this question, unless of course this really is in your baileywick:

"Does the DOT mowing schedule optimize the mowing of wild parsnip, cutting before it goes to seed? If not, is it possible for scheduling to be adjusted so as to do so?"

Wild parsnip is a very nasty plant. Contact with its sap, followed by exposure to sunlight, causes really bad burns. I personally have been very aware of its rampant growth along the

Interstate, and have hoped that mowers were wearing protective gear, including protective glasses. Any way of stymying its growth, short of herbicides, would be great!

Thanks for any and all help.

Sincerely,

Maida F. Townsend  
State Representative