

## Mowing your acreage

There are numerous small acreage landowners that keep their fields mowed. When I have asked why these landowners mow their fields the response is often for protection from wildfire. Mowing can be a useful tool for reducing fire and controlling weeds. However too much mowing can also have negative impacts to the vegetation and sometimes encourage weeds. Also there are many species of wildlife native to the prairies that can benefit from tall vegetation areas. These tall plant areas provide many benefits for wildlife.

Tall vegetation is very beneficial to many species of wildlife. These areas provide cover to escape from predators as well as provide hiding for their nests and young. There is a variety of song birds and upland game birds that require dense tall vegetated areas for nesting and raising their young. Many of these species will nest in May and have flightless young until the first week of July. Dense cover is also essential for thermal protection from winter's harsh temperatures, snow and wind. Many small mammals such as rabbits also use these areas. Prairie dogs and ground squirrels prefer shorter vegetation areas to survive. These animals rely on being able to see their predators from a long distance to provide time to escape. Both tall and short vegetation areas occur naturally in Laramie County. Most likely you will know which category you fall into and the wildlife present in that area are there because of that vegetation and the natural surrounding habitat. I know many people move out to an acreage to enjoy the wildlife so think before you mow.

Fire is a definite concern that needs to be considered when you are leaving areas of tall vegetation. It is recommended to create a defensible space around your buildings or landscaping to protect them from wildfire. In grasslands it is recommended to create a 100 foot perimeter around the areas you want to protect. The first 30 feet out away from the area or building you are trying to protect should be mowed down to about 3 inches. The next 70 feet only has to be mowed down to 6 to 8 inches. This will give you a 100 foot defensible space around the areas or buildings to be protected.

Mowing will also have a big impact on the soil. Taller vegetation will protect the soil from the wind and keep it from blowing away. Taller vegetation will catch more snow reducing snow drifting in unwanted areas and providing more moisture for the soil in the spring. Taller vegetation also shades the soil keeping it cooler and retaining moisture longer. More moisture in the soil means the grass will stay greener longer and reduce the stress on the plant. Healthy grasses will be able to out compete weeds more effectively.

Mowing can be a form of weed control if used correctly. Some weeds can be eliminated by mowing the infested area several years in a row at the same time of year, allowing desirable plants a competitive edge. If you mow before the weeds have seed heads this can keep them from going to seed but if mowed with the seed heads you can actually spread the seeds. However, there are some weeds that mowing will encourage regrowth and actually increase your problem. Excessive mowing can also be similar to overgrazing and actually encourage weeds. When the good grasses are mowed to low or

to many times over the summer it will deplete the energy reserves in the plants root system and decrease its ability to compete against weeds. If possible just mow the areas that are infested with the weed. You can call the Laramie County Conservation District for assistance on identifying your problem weed and developing a management strategy.

Even if you do decide to leave some of your property in tall vegetation it is a good idea to either mow or graze it every third to fourth year to remove some of the old dead material. This is especially important for vegetation that is very thick and tall. You can also separate your property out into four parts and mow a part every year, spreading it out over four years. This will allow at least a portion of your property available for wildlife habitat every year.

Some areas in the county will have a majority of shorter grass species which probably means that is what occurs there naturally and doesn't need mowed or needs it less frequently like every 5 to 7 years.

If you decide to mow your property remember to wait until July to protect nesting prairie birds. If you are mowing for weeds before July it is a good idea to walk the area that you plan to mow watching for birds flying up. If you see a bird fly up check that area to determine if there is a nest or young in the vicinity. Also, remember to leave your mower on the highest setting possible to leave the most stubble to protect the soil from blowing away and drying out.

If you have questions on weeds, mowing, or any vegetation management contact the Laramie County Conservation District at 772-2600.