

Conservancy Bush Hogging Policy - 2021



The goal of grassland management on Willowsford Conservancy property is to increase wildlife habitat value and ecosystem services. Resident needs and desires are also an important consideration when determining strategies for grassland management.

All grasslands at Willowsford have differing characteristics, from proximity to private property to species composition and wildlife habitat value. Thus, a set of objectives has been designed to allow for the effective management of grassland areas to meet conservation goals and resident needs.

The following is the set of objectives and action items which will be used to meet the goals of ecologically-sound grassland management while meeting the needs of Willowsford residents.

Summary

Grassland management via bush hogging aims to be an adaptive process taking site characteristics and management objectives into consideration. Grassland areas will be monitored to determine if management objectives are being met and management activities will be adjusted if necessary. The following objectives will be used to determine bush hogging regimes for specific grassland areas. All Conservancy grasslands adjacent to private property will have buffer strips bush hogged to mitigate plant and wildlife encroachment. Buffer strips will be bush hogged in June, August, and November.

Bush hogging regimes can be split into the following categories. They are listed in decreasing conservation value.

- A. Once every 3 years – Late Winter (March)
- B. Once a year – Late Winter (March)
- C. Twice a year – Late Winter & Late Fall

Goal: Employ ecologically-sound bush hogging practices to meet land conservation and resident needs.

Objectives:

1. Reduce negative impacts on grassland wildlife during nesting season.
2. Increase food resource availability for wildlife.
3. Provide over-winter cover for wildlife.
4. Control invasive species.
5. Reduce vegetation & wildlife encroachment on private and resident-used land.
6. Maintain landscape aesthetics.
7. Maintain grassland habitat.
8. Allow reforestation through natural succession.

Objective 1. Reduce negative impacts on grassland wildlife during nesting season.

Bush hogging inherently disrupts wildlife activity and wildlife habitat. Wildlife are most vulnerable during the nesting season when adults are building nests and young are being raised. Reducing frequency and delaying bush hogging until after the grassland nesting season can mitigate negative impacts on wildlife.

Actions:

- Do not bush hog during grassland wildlife nesting season (April – September).
- Set bush hog blades at a height of no less than 8 in.

Objective 2. Increase food resource availability for wildlife.

Wildlife food resources include fruit, seeds, vegetative matter, pollen and nectar, among other materials. Additionally, grassland management which supports insect populations provides more food resources for other wildlife such as birds, reptiles and amphibians, and mammals.

Actions:

- Bush hog after bloom season has ended and wildflowers have set seed (November or March).
 - o This will increase wildflower proliferation to the benefit of seed-eating animals and pollinators. Additionally, this will promote wildflower meadow establishment, increasing landscape aesthetics.

Objective 3. Provide over-winter cover for wildlife.

Wildlife require refuge from winter conditions just as humans do. Standing vegetation provides more space for wildlife to create over-wintering nests. This may have the additional benefit of providing over-winter habitat for wildlife away from resident homes.

Actions:

- Bush hog in the late winter and let vegetation grow throughout season.

Objective 4. Control invasive species.

Invasive species management is a key component of Willowsford Conservancy's land stewardship plan. Bush hogging can suppress the growth and spread of certain invasive grassland species.

Actions:

- Bush hogging twice a year can help reduce the expansion of grassland invasive species such as autumn olive, lespedeza, and johnsongrass. Bush hogging before these plants set seed decreases their expansion to other areas.
- If bush hogging is deemed too disruptive to the grassland ecosystem or invasive species are less abundant, other forms of mechanical and chemical control can be used in place of bush hogging.

Objective 5. Reduce vegetation & wildlife encroachment on private and resident-used land.

Undesirable vegetation is managed on Conservancy property to reduce spread onto private property and resident-used areas. Additionally, actions will be taken to mitigate unwanted wildlife encroachment.

Actions:

- Bush hog buffer strips between private property and resident-used areas and grasslands. Buffer strips will be bush hogged in June, August, and November.

Objective 6. Maintain landscape aesthetics.

Some consider tall grass to be "overgrown" or "unmanaged". While subjective, this must be taken into consideration in highly visible locations or where bush hogging emphasizes other features (i.e. viewsheds, sign or amenity visibility).

Actions:

- Bush hogging twice a year can reduce grassland height while avoiding bush hogging during the nesting season.
- In areas of high visibility but low proximity to private property, bush hogging buffer strips along roadsides or fence lines can provide visual representation of active management while maintaining grassland habitat.
- The aesthetic value of wildflower meadows will also be accounted for. Late-season bush hogging can facilitate wildflower proliferation by allowing flowers to bloom and set seed.

Objective 7. Maintain grassland habitat.

In the Virginia Piedmont, nature will attempt to slowly convert grasslands to forests through the process of natural succession. To increase habitat diversity and maintain grassland ecosystems, the Conservancy uses bush hogging to reduce woody species growth in grassland areas.

Actions:

- Bush hogging once every 3 years in the late winter will reduce woody species establishment and maintain open grassland habitat. Additionally, such a low frequency of bush hogging will reduce management disturbance and promote healthy grassland habitat.

Objective 8. Allow reforestation through natural succession.

Left undisturbed, grasslands at Willowsford will slowly revert to forest through natural succession. In certain areas, succession from grassland to forest is the desirable outcome of grassland management. Additionally, the intermediate shrubland is a unique and imperiled ecosystem required by certain species. Allowing for natural succession will increase habitat diversity and support shrubland wildlife populations.

Actions:

- Do not bush hog these areas to allow woody species to establish and reforestation to occur.
- Monitor areas for invasive or undesirable species presence to determine if chemical or mechanical control is necessary.