

Transmission & Distribution

AEP smoothes ROW maintenance with herbicide contract mixing

DOUG KELLEY, AMERICAN ELECTRIC POWER

With an array of environmental concerns facing America and the public highly scrutinizing large corporations, utilities can dispel some community anxiety by making environmentally sound decisions along public rights-of-way (ROW).

American Electric Power (AEP) is keenly aware of this and has taken steps to maintain its rights-of-way in a manner that focuses on environmental concerns, while at the same time, protecting both the its community image and the company's bottom line.

AEP vegetation managers have moved toward contract mixing services to receive herbicides and premixed solutions in returnable, refillable containers. These services decrease the number of used containers taking up landfill space, while cutting ROW maintenance costs and promoting better community relations.

While this technology has been available in the agricultural sector for many years, it has only recently emerged as a trend among utilities.

The green details

Before the advent of contract mixing, AEP had no system in place to detour herbicide drums from landfills. To put it in perspective, AEP manages 186,000 distribution and 33,000 transmission line miles. Since adopting the returnable, refillable program, the

utility has prevented the disposal of enough herbicide containers to fill two football fields. Not surprisingly, AEP now orders 90 percent of its herbicides via contract mixing services.

Aside from the environmental aspects, disposing of empty drums is costly. The United States Environmental Protection Agency requires used herbicide containers to be triple rinsed, cut into pieces and specially bagged before disposal. By the time they finish, workers have handled each container at least three times. In five years, just one returnable, refillable container saves \$365 in container disposal fees compared to a normal drum.

"The returnable, refillable containers require no cleanup measures, and their closed-loop application systems decrease the chance for worker exposure," said Dave Schoonover, the founder of utility contract mixing and presi-

dent of Aquinix Inc. "Not to mention that end users no longer store empty containers on their property because we immediately retrieve drums and refill them accordingly."

The process details

Before AEP receives its shipments, permanent bar codes are affixed to drums for tracking. The bar code numbers, container contents and destinations are logged into an electronic database.

"We can identify the specific batch number of registered products used from manufacturers, type of mix and amount of product, as well as many other variables, from the time the container leaves the facility to when it returns," Schoonover stated. "This tracking system gives AEP higher product accountability standards and decreases leftover and wasted herbicides, thus saving the utility money."

AEP's Midwestern District regularly orders contract mixes containing Garlon 3A herbicide and Tordon 101M herbicide, both trademarks of Dow AgroSciences. By working with contract mixers who use computerized systems to create the mixes, AEP is guaranteed a precise mixture just in time for application. This eliminates the hassle and time associated with crews mixing herbicides on site, and helps the utility better manage inventory.

The method also gives AEP vegetation management crews increased credibility. With returnable, refillable containers and closed-

loop application, onlookers never see crews mixing or pouring herbicides into tanks. Since, AEP workers are constantly in the public eye, portraying this positive land stewardship image reduces the chance for complaints.



Utilities save money and enforce good land stewardship practices with the use of returnable, refillable containers and contract mixing.

From a public image standpoint, contract mixing may be one of AEP's wisest investments. While the technology may not be able to dismiss all challenges facing utilities, it is certainly a step toward economical, environmentally sound right-of-way maintenance. **E.P.**

Kelley is system forestry coordinator for AEP in Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Kentucky and West Virginia. He can be reached via phone 614-883-7366 or e-mail (dkkelley@aep.com). Schoonover can be reached via phone 1-800-496-2649 or e-mail (dvs@aquinix.com).



The closed-loop system on the returnable, refillable containers alleviates spills and reduces chances for worker exposure.