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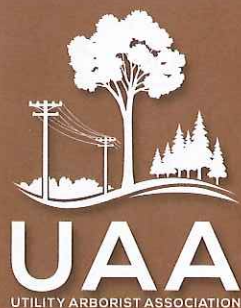
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The Power of Partnerships: Public-Private Alliances in Utility Arboriculture Research

By J. Eric Smith, President and CEO, TREE Fund



During this summer's field day, Dr. Carolyn Mahan (in foreground) and Dr. Hannah Stout of Penn State University discussed and demonstrated the native bee collection methods as part of the current SGL 33 three-year research plan.

The Lessons of SGL 33

Much of our modern understanding of integrated vegetation management (IVM) along utility rights-of-way (ROW) stems from work done in the long-term Pennsylvania State Game Lands 33 Research Project (SGL 33) and its lessons have been profound. Equally profound, though less obvious, are the lessons on how to get such transformative research work implemented and managed, and the findings disseminated. There are no more powerful methods for doing so than through the implementation of public-private partnerships involving as many stakeholder organizations as practically possible, with strong central coordination and leadership by one of the partners.

In the case of SGL 33, a consortium of public and private partners was established nearly 65 years ago in direct response to concerns raised regarding the potential impacts on game species from herbicide spraying along electric transmission ROWs in the mountains of central Pennsylvania. Key participants in the founding years of the project included Asplundh Tree Expert Co. (under the leadership of technical supervisor Hyland R. Johns), Penn State University, Pennsylvania Game Commission, Penelec (now part of FirstEnergy), DuPont, and American Chemical Paint Company. Remarkably,

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nearly all partners are still involved today. The only change is that, in recent decades, the herbicide partner has been Dow AgroSciences.

For those who aren't familiar with the history of the SGL 33 research, Dr. William Bramble of Penn State and his (then) graduate research assistant Richard Byrnes were the scientists who worked with their corporate and governmental partners to develop a research protocol along three and a half miles of ROW in the Allegheny Mountain Plateau Region of Pennsylvania. They gathered the wildlife and plant data, but the test plot treatments were performed by actual Asplundh ROW technicians from the surrounding communities, thereby accurately simulating real working conditions in the field.

Bramble and Byrnes (who both joined the Forestry Department at Purdue University) remarkably continued to oversee the work on the plots through 1999, issuing more than 60 seminal research papers and reports together during that time regarding their findings at SGL 33. Their work continued—and continues to this day—on some of the very sites that they first staked out in 1953, demonstrating the benefits of IVM for wildlife habitat and ROW stewardship.

The research focus has evolved in recent years to address changing technology and interests, including the wire/border zone method for enhanced wildlife habitat, and evaluations of non-game wildlife on the ROW. In recent years, Dr. Carolyn Mahan of Penn State has implemented a new, in-depth native bee pollinator research project at SGL 33. Her promising results to date indicate that sites with selective herbicide use have higher pollinator abundance and diversity, furthering the collective wisdom gleaned from the long-term, public-private partnership at SGL 33.

The power of this partnership has served to guide best management practices for ROW VM, provided a



A June 2017 field day at SGL 33 provided an opportunity for representatives of the partnering organizations, and many other interested parties, to observe data collection methods and plant/animal response to the various treatment methods.

positive message to the public, and now through the Utility Arborist Association (UAA), inspired new research for the future.

Empowering Research Partnerships

Hyland Johns, 35 years after playing a key role in the implementation of the SGL 33 project, further positively altered the course of arboriculture research by serving as one of the founding trustees of the ISA Research Trust, which merged with the National Arborist Foundation in 2002 and was reorganized as the Tree Research and Education Endowment Fund, or TREE Fund, of which I am now the president and chief executive officer. Our mission is to support

scientific discovery and dissemination of new knowledge in the fields of arboriculture and urban forestry – and our primary keys to success hinge on our ability to facilitate, forge, and fund the types of public-private partnerships that once made SGL 33 possible.

The most compelling example of this model in our recent history revolves around the Utility Arborist Research Fund (UARF), established by TREE Fund and the UAA in 2010. UARF will finance research work with real importance and benefit to utility arboriculture professionals, as well as the customers and communities they serve. A target goal was set at \$1.0 million, which will generate at least



Shown here in May 1990, Dr. William Bramble (R) and his research partner Dr. Richard Byrnes (L) were still actively overseeing the SGL 33 research. In the center is retired Asplundh Senior Vice President Hyland Johns, who helped initiate the public-private research project in 1952 and supervised the first right-of-way (ROW) treatments there.

\$50,000 in utility arboriculture research annually in perpetuity once the fund is fully endowed.

Seed donations from Arizona Public Service Co. and early gifts from Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E), Ameren, National Grid, UAA, Sacramento Municipal Utility District (SMUD), Texas-New Mexico Power, Edison Electric Institute, and many others raised the UARF endowment to approximately \$360,000 by the end of 2015. Parallel to this fundraising effort, TREE Fund consolidated support from a variety of public and private partners to fund John Goodfellow's independent research work on a quantitative approach to determining optimal VM spending and cycle times. The final report on this work was issued in 2015.

Recognizing the pressing need for, and value of, additional utility arboriculture research, PG&E established a \$250,000 matching gift program in early 2016 to mobilize partnership building, and TREE Fund set out to raise the \$500,000 required to fully meet the PG&E Challenge. PG&E also provided an additional \$250,000 in seed funding via UAA for a long-term utility ROW IVM project that could expand on many of SGL 33's techniques in different climates and biomes, with additional focus on educational access, pollinator protection, and project replication throughout the nation's 11.0 million acres of electric transmission ROW.

The full measure of the cross-disciplinary commitment required to successfully fund and manage such work can perhaps be considered when assessing the success of the PG&E matching challenge program: it was completed six months earlier than the target date of December 2017, pushing the UARF endowment above its \$1.0 million activation goal. Support came from large utility concerns and small regional providers, from equipment manufacturers and suppliers, UVM contractors and tree care consultants, and individuals within and outside of the utility arboriculture field. They all pooled their resources in TREE Fund's management for the betterment of the utility industry and its customers, and the global environment in which we all live and work. Many long-term partners participated in the PG&E Challenge, but it also engaged significant contributions from new partners such as Berkshire Hathaway Energy Foundation and Mowbray's Tree Service, further expanding the pool of champions empowering this important research.

TREE Fund also took the matching challenge and awarded a \$175,000 grant in late 2016 to Sonoma State University (SSU) in partnership with PG&E, SMUD, and UAA to examine



UTILITY ARBORIST RESEARCH FUND
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TREE Fund and the UAA partnered to establish the Utility Arborist Research Fund (UARF) seven years ago and thanks to strong industry and individual support, the \$1.0 million endowment goal has already been reached.

In addition to the PG&E Challenge, the proceeds from various fundraising events successfully built the UARF endowment. For example, the annual Asplundh Golf Outing to benefit TREE Fund supports the UARF through the sale of hole sponsorships.

various VM techniques on powerline ROW in a variety of ecosystem types and locations, including sites where VM must be balanced with control of fire risk. TREE Fund is actively seeking other projects to continue building on this model as a way of affirming and enhancing research findings, while

also providing educational opportunities for municipalities and governments, along with commercial and residential utility customers, to develop an understanding of the importance and benefits of comprehensive scientific IVM programs along utility ROWs. We expect further announcements on this front in 2018.

A Whole Greater Than the Sum of Its Parts

As a result of the shared sense of commitment and connection forged by positive response to the PG&E Challenge, TREE Fund will open its competitive UARF grant program in January 2018, expecting to award \$50,000 in that and all future years to improve our understanding of the types of critical questions once framed—and subsequently answered—by our prescient forebears in central Pennsylvania more than a half century ago.

The visionary commitment of the public and private partners who have worked in this field in the past years has produced a “whole greater than the sum of the parts” effect that has reaped environmental, financial, and safety benefits far beyond what could have been achieved had the various agents acted in isolation. TREE Fund is proud to continue serving as a motivator and facilitator of such partnerships, with gratitude to those whose commitment makes it possible for us to do so.