RECLAMATION OF THE LAND

Seizing an opportunity to change public perception

BY COLBY F. SCROGGINS

As oil and gas projects are moving ahead at a faster pace—and with greater public awareness than ever before—we are seeing a unique opportunity arise. In the well sites and pipelines constructed, we can take advantage of this opportunity by improving the landscape and ecology beyond what it was before the construction. After all, how we finish these projects will be seen for many years to come.

"Why bother? Nothing grows here anyway." This is a comment I have heard countless times over the last six months. My response? Let's fix that... or, at the very least make the effort to help those involved become successful. The ability to restore the land, as well as enhance or develop wildlife and pollinator habitat, are possible within the reclamation process. Just imagine the positive impact this could have on public perception.

Photo courtesy of the Interstate Natural Gas Association of America

Making it Happen

The impact that the North American prairies and grasslands have on our environment is understood now more than ever. These prairies and grasslands provide forage for livestock, habitat for wildlife and keep soils from eroding away from high winds and aggressive rains.

Grasslands and prairies intake large amounts of carbon from the air, thereby capturing and storing this carbon in the soil and providing part of the nutrient content to plant life. Once these areas become densely vegetative, greater water infiltration of the soil can occur. This allows for the moisture needed by the vegetation to be retained in the soil.

Following are a few simple tips that can make a dramatic impact on the result.

Topsoil - Most of the organic matter is contained in the first several inches of topsoil. Keeping it separate from the subsoil allows for quicker establishment because it helps prevent diluting the organic matter. This is one of the contributing factors that prevent the microbes contained in the topsoil from being destroyed.

Soil Compaction - As heavy equipment moves along the right of way during construction, soil compaction can become a challenge. If it becomes severe, it can restrict water infiltration and contribute to poor vegetative performance. In most instances, light tillage prior to planting will help resolve this issue.

Seeding Rate - Most conservation-based seeding rates use a three to four year timeline for a full vegetative establishment. This can be counter-productive in high erosion areas where concerns like aggressive winds and fast-moving stormwater can suddenly arise. Using the appropriate seeding rate for the specific site needs can reduce the timeline.

Planting Method - Not all planting methods are considered equal, and reclamation results will vary drastically unless the correct mechanical method of planting is used. For example, the use of a grass drill allows for the correct planting depth, greater regulation of the seeding rate and proper seed to soil contact all in a single process. However, a grain drill can present its own challenges, as they are designed for traditional crops and can create problems with planting depth and seeding rate regulation.

Species Selection - Selecting the correct species for your project will offer better erosion control with dense and deep-rooted native grasses, pollinator habitat, pasture forage or even wildlife enhancement. Still, excluding some species could be just as beneficial.

There is a quote that I live by that states, "Trying and failing is better than not trying at all."

The next time you hear, "Why bother? Nothing grows here anyway," I encourage you to look at the upside. With a little know-how, your chances might be better than you thought. ✪

"...we can take advantage of this opportunity by improving the landscape..."

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