Phragmites - Basic Control

Phragmites is native to North America and Eurasia but it is the Eurasian subspecies which has become a serious invasive species threat. The invasive Phragmites can grow to be 15 to 20 feet tall and virtually eliminate native plant species within it's stands and adversely affect the movement and habitat of native animals. The plant produces a large, somewhat one-sided, fluffy seed head holding up to 2000 very small seeds with silky hairs, like milkweed seeds, which are easily dispersed over great distances by the wind. Phragmites can also aggressively spread vegetatively by extending underground stems known as rhizomes. The native Phragmites is much shorter, up to just over six feet high, and occurs in sparser densities with other plants. Native Phragmites is also red on the lower stem, and often on the leaf bases, with a much more open and symmetrical seed head. It is important to correctly identify the Phragmites subspecies before deciding if control measures are warranted or on a control regimen.

Elimination or control of Phragmites can only be reliably done with a 2-3 year regimen of attacking the right portion of the plant at the proper time in it's life cycle with chemical herbicide treatment in the first year and retreatment of escapes in the second and third years. Small stands should be treated in summer or early fall by cutting the plants at waist height and injecting a large drop of 25% herbicide concentrate into the hollow lower stem with a syringe, applicator bottle or other device. Plants may also be treated by hand swiping the stem with a cotton wicking glove, worn over a chemical resistant glove, soaked with a 1.5% concentration herbicide mix. The same mix may also be applied with a low-pressure garden sprayer, spraying the stem near the leaves, but runs the risk of killing non-target plants nearby with spray drift if not done carefully. Cut debris should be dried and burned especially if seed set has already begun. Large stands of Phragmites usually require aerial or boom spraying where soil conditions and access are suitable. A pretreatment of the control area in winter or spring by burning to remove old canes and other biomass can make the herbicide treatment regimen easier but should be done with extreme caution as the canes burn very hot and fast. Mowing can also be used but may stimulate denser re-growth unless chemically treated.

The two most recommended treatment chemicals are Imazapyr and Glyphosate. Imazapyr is very effective but much more expensive than Glyphosate. It also has the possible disadvantage, depending on the site, of persisting in the soil for multiple years and moving along the target species rhizomes to kill non-target plants, including woody ones. Glyphosate is a much cheaper treatment and can be very effective with follow-up treatments as needed. For further information about Phragmites biology, identification or treatment. Contact the SW x SW CISMA at 269-657-4030 x 5 or Cass County Conservation District at 1127 E. State Street, Cassopolis at 269-445-8641 ext.5.