

# Establishment of Natural (Volunteer) Vegetation

Discussion: Establishment of natural or volunteer vegetation involves creating or maintaining conditions that will allow plants or seeds that presently exist in a dormant state in the soil or in a suppressed state to compete and grow into mature plants. In addition to these plants, others may also be supplied from offsite locations by such mechanisms as wind (light, wind-carried seed) and transport by animals or water. Many natural plant communities that are encouraged to volunteer are considered beneficial to wildlife and usually provide good conservation cover.

An important point to note is that the terms 'natural' or 'volunteer' are used instead of 'native' vegetation. Plants are generally described as native if they were present in a region prior to European settlement. Since this early date, Europeans and others have introduced (by purposeful and accidental means) non-native or alien species to the point where they now make up an estimated 25% of the entire plant community. Therefore, use of the term **natural** or **volunteer** is more appropriate than native.

## Methods:

**A. Cropland:** Simply allow natural plants to establish.  
Control of noxious weeds may be needed.

**B. Idle land/Old field:** Maintain in natural vegetation by use of periodic disturbance using prescribed fire, light discing or mowing every 2-4 years. Rotationally disturbing 1/3 (or 1/2 if the area is small) of the area each year is best for wildlife. Avoid disturbance during the nesting season.

**C. Undesirable vegetation** (often a monoculture of aggressive or invasive species). In this case, the existing undesirable plants need to be controlled (elimination is usually not practical) before natural establishment of volunteer species can occur. Refer to Appendix C, "Establishment of Warm Season Grass / Early Successional Habitat Timelines" for proper sequence and timing of control measures.

## Notes:

- It usually takes 3-6 years of management/maintenance before an optimal natural vegetative community of mixed grasses and forbs can be obtained.
- This often involves use of selective herbicides or spot herbicide treatment, along with periodic disturbance.
- It usually takes longer to establish the grass component of the plant community.
- If maintenance/management is not applied, the area will advance through succession from grass to shrubs to trees.