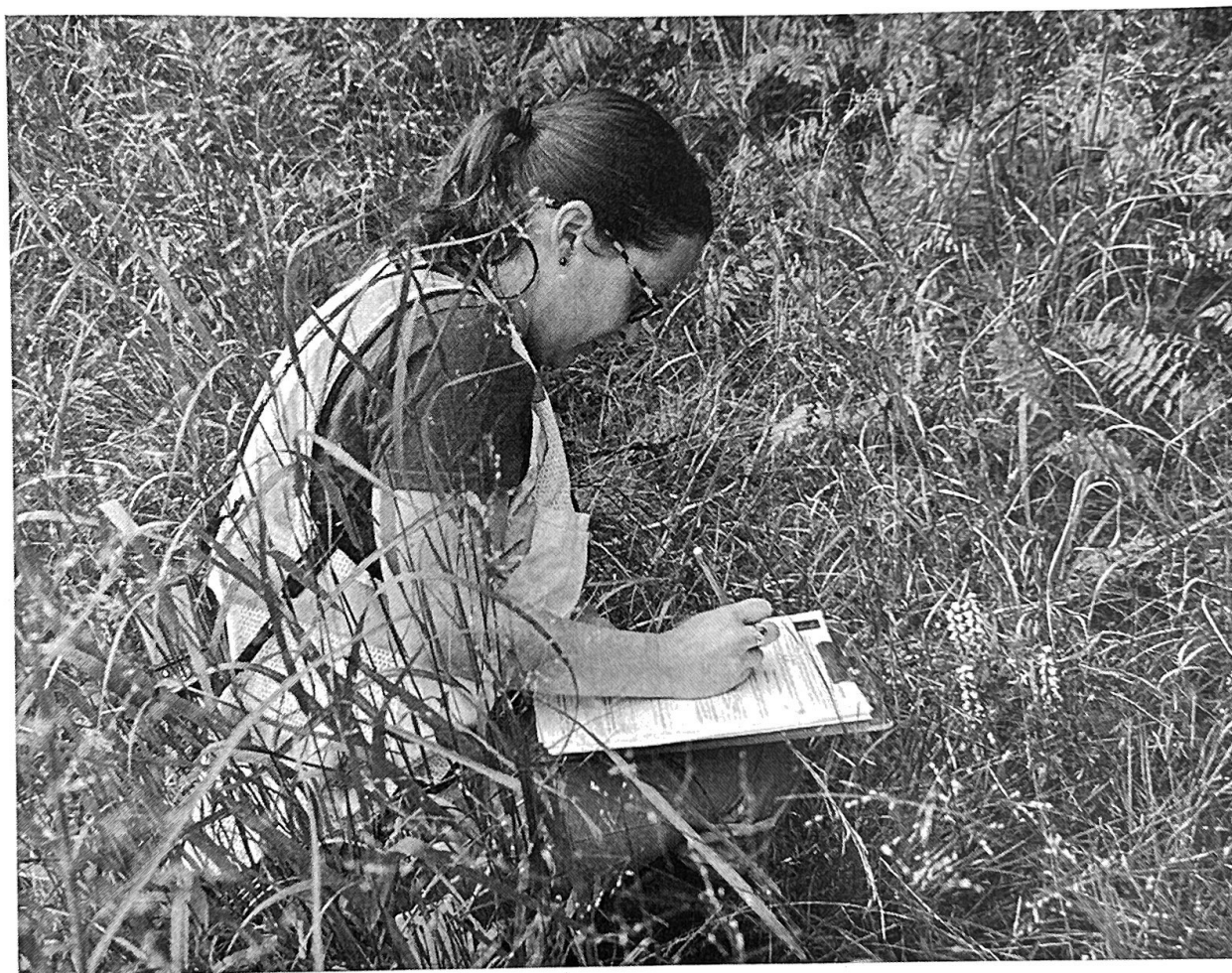


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Roadsides are a lot more colorful, thanks to Pinelands Commission

MICHELLE BRUNETTI POST Staff Writer Oct 25, 2018



Pinelands Commission resource planner Robyn A. Jeney spots native orchids growing along Route 563 in B during one of her surveys of roadside vegetation in the Pinelands.

PAUL LEAKAN / provided

Pinelands roadsides are often the last refuge for native plants that once thrived throughout the forest — when wildfires regularly created openings for them.

"These plants grow in open and sunny habitats," said Pinelands Commission resource planner Robyn A. Jeney. "Because of wildfire suppression, a lot of forests are way too shaded."

Roadsides are a man-made version of those open areas, Jeney said. The commission estimates there are 11,000 acres of roadside in the 1.1 million acre Pinelands National Reserve.

So the commission works with counties to minimize mowing on county roads from March to November, giving plants like the Pine Barren gentian, sandwort, sand-myrtle and others the chance to complete their life cycle, set seed and survive into the future, Jeney said.

"It helps maintain the beauty of the Pinelands to be able to see more species because of this," said Commission spokesman Paul Leakan.

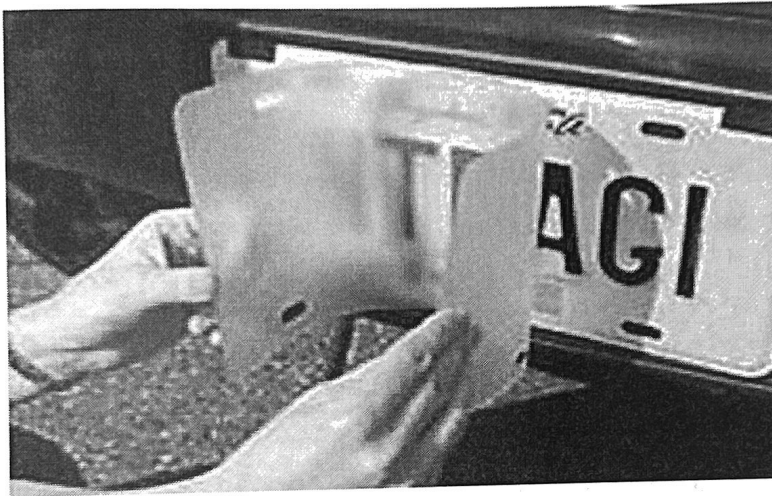
Jeney said her road surveys have shown compliance is good.

"I'm happy to see three-foot tall grasses and mowing strips," she said. "This is what it's supposed to look like."

Where rare plants are known to grow, the commission asks counties not to mow at all, and counties put up signs that explain the lack of mowing. But the commission keeps secret which rare plants grow where, to avoid collectors disturbing areas, she said.

Atlantic County has gladly participated, said County Executive Dennis Levinson.

"We complied immediately," said Levinson. It saved labor and time, and damage to equipment that used to happen when workers mowed all the way back to the tree line.



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"The further in you go, the more things you hit," said Levinson. Now the county mows about 6 feet in and no further, he said.

The county has gotten some complaints from people who don't understand why the county changed its mowing habits. He said workers still pick up litter further in, and use some of the time saved to focus on getting rid of weeds growing in median strips.

The commission has had a roadside plant protection program since 2009, said Jeney. But in the last two years a greater effort of outreach has resulted in more compliance, she said.

"It was a process of understanding what their needs are, where they can bend and where they can't," said Jeney, who also works on permanent land conservation through the Pinelands Conservation Fund and other projects. "Overall the counties are all receptive and willing to work with us."

The program was developed with the Pinelands Preservation Alliance, state and county transportation officials, and local botanists to develop best management practices for mowing and maintenance.

Those practices include mowing to at least 6 inches high, only on a single strip closest to the pavement; restoring roadside soils after road projects; avoiding mowing sparsely vegetated areas at all times; and mowing rare plant areas only once a year during the dormant season.

Commission spokesman Paul Leakan said public safety remains paramount. Sight lines at intersections and elsewhere are always maintained, he said.

The commission added the best management practices to a memorandum of agreement being developed at the time with Pinelands counties. It simplifies the application process for minor road improvements, in exchange for the counties adjusting their mowing practices, said Leakan.

Agreements have been executed with Atlantic, Burlington, Camden, Gloucester and Ocean counties. Cape May and Cumberland counties have yet to join.

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Environmental groups call on Murphy to change Pinelands commissioners