This is part six of a series of articles that inform the public of an ambitious project that will benefit our local communities in many ways. Claverack Rural Electric Cooperative has undertaken a lawn-to-native pollinator habitat transition project on the grounds of their headquarters building, located along Route 6 in Wysox, Pennsylvania. Expected benefits include improved environmental stewardship, evaluating new right-of-way management strategies, educational opportunities for local students and groups, and reduced maintenance costs. Claverack is a rural electric cooperative that is owned by the members we serve.

The Utility Right-of-Way

An electric utility has an easement for properties where it has poles and wires. Utility easements are required from property owners prior to a utility beginning powerline construction and offering electrical service to customers or members. The easement allows the utility to access and maintain the powerlines to include tree trimming, brush cutting, and ongoing right-of-way maintenance.

Though easements can vary from one electric provider to another, they typically include language that permits the utility to access and maintain their powerlines. Claverack maintains a 40-foot right-of-way (20 feet on each side of the line) for most of its high-voltage powerlines. A maintenance schedule is followed to keep trees and brush in check.

Right-of-way maintenance is always a challenge for an electric utility. This is especially true for Claverack as we live in a region that is densely populated with trees and the invasive Emerald Ash Boer has decimated our ash trees.

Historical electric right-of-way management programs include tree trimming, tree removal, and brush cutting, but mechanical cutting costs are high and always increasing. More recently, targeted spraying has been utilized for vegetation control, and for some utilities, has been an important part of their integrated vegetation management strategy for decades.

One of the primary goals of our native pollinator habitat project is to evaluate how we may be able to transition some of our rights-of-way to plantings that require less maintenance, while at the same time, providing benefits to the natural environment.

Reestablishing native plant species helps control invasive plants and pests and creates greater biodiversity. Birds, bees, butterflies, and other beneficial insects thrive in areas that are designed, constructed, and maintained to support them.

Utility rights-of-way are increasingly understood to provide habitat for declining species of songbirds; combining early successional low shrub habitat with pollinator plantings provides both food and cover for some of these species.

Pollinator habitat also contributes to improved water quality compared to soil-disturbing activities done with heavy, traditional right-of-way maintenance equipment.

Our program began with a lawn-to-native pollinator habitat transition on cooperative-owned property. In the years to come, we hope to expand our experiment to select pilot projects

on properties that Claverack members own. Eventually, we'd like to transition some of our 2,800 miles of right-of-way to native pollinator habitat.

Electric utilities and landowners agree – a healthy and improving environment – and reliable electricity – benefits us all.