



**MA Department of Conservation and Recreation  
Office of Regional Planning  
Best Management Practices**

## Grassland Management

**Contacts:** Paul Cavanagh  
Resource Management Planner  
(508) 866-2580 x 122  
[paul.cavanagh@state.ma.us](mailto:paul.cavanagh@state.ma.us)

**Goal:** Promote native vegetation and wildlife in grasslands and maintain historic landscapes while reducing the amount of mowing that you need to perform.



Souza Homesite grassland – Nasketucket Bay SR

### Guidelines:

When managed correctly, grasslands (also called old fields or meadows) can provide habitat for a variety of native plants and wildlife, and maintain historic landscapes. If left unattended, they will revert to forest. Mowing and burning are two commonly used methods of grassland management. Because prescribed fire requires training and equipment not normally provided to field operations personnel, this BMP focuses on mowing.

This BMP provides general guidance on managing most grasslands. However, some grasslands require a special management approach. Refer to the ***Special Considerations*** section (below) if the grassland that you wish to mow is part of a larger cultural landscape, has been identified as Priority Habitat, is located in or near a wetland or stream, or is currently in active agriculture.

### General

- Minor changes in the frequency and timing of mowing, deck height, mower speed, and cutting pattern can improve our parks' resources.
- Avoid mowing the entire grassland in a single year. Instead, divide the grassland into two or three sections and mow each section only once every 2-3 years.
- Grasslands with extensive trees and shrubs will require hand cutting prior to mowing.
- Hand cut any invasive plants in fruit prior to mowing; keep these cut materials away from your mower deck so that you don't spread their seeds.
- Wash equipment both before and after mowing in order to prevent the spread of invasive plants.
- Mow as late in the year as possible. Many of our pollinators need fall flowers as a food source. Cutting should occur only **after** the late summer and fall flowers have died back.

- If you can't delay cutting until the late fall, wait until at least after September 15<sup>th</sup>. This ensures that nesting birds and turtles are out of the field before you cut.
- Use a mowing deck height of at least 7 inches above the ground; 12 inches if possible. This protects your equipment and avoids killing wildlife.
- Mow in low gear or at slow speeds so that wildlife has time to avoid the tractor and mower.
- Mow in a pattern that allows wildlife to escape the tractor and mower. Start mowing from the center of the field and use either a back-and-forth approach, or a large circular pattern. This avoids concentrating fleeing animals where they may be killed or stranded.
- If a trail passes through your grassland, mow the trail edges as needed with a small lawnmower to keep the trail open as a single track.
- Educate park goers about the goals and benefits of your grassland management. Healthy, managed grasslands look different than lawns, and may be unfamiliar to the public.

### **Special Considerations**

- When grasslands are part of a cultural landscape, review your proposed management with the Office of Cultural Resources **prior to** any mowing. ([wendy.pearl@state.ma.us](mailto:wendy.pearl@state.ma.us))  
*Examples include: Maudslay SP, Borderland SP, Blackstone HSP, and Moore SP*
- Grasslands in areas identified as Priority Habitat cannot be legally cut until review and approval by the Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program. Consult with the DCR ecologist **prior to** any mowing. ([nancy.putnam@state.ma.us](mailto:nancy.putnam@state.ma.us))  
*Examples include: Nasketucket Bay SR, Mount Tom SR, and Mt. Holyoke Range SP*
- Grasslands in or near wetlands and perennial streams are regulated under the Massachusetts Wetland Protection Act. Consult with the DCR ecologist **prior to** any mowing. ([nancy.putnam@state.ma.us](mailto:nancy.putnam@state.ma.us)) *Examples include: Mount Holyoke Range SP*
- Areas in active agriculture, such as corn or hay fields, should follow best agricultural management practices. *Examples include: Connecticut River Greenway SP*

### **Resources**

- Oliver – an online mapping tool for displaying wetlands, Priority Habitat, and much more. [http://maps.massgis.state.ma.us/map\\_ol/oliver.php](http://maps.massgis.state.ma.us/map_ol/oliver.php)
- Ecological Management of Grasslands. <http://www.thetrustees.org/assets/documents/what-we-care-about/Grassland-Guidelines-2009.pdf>
- Mowing Advisory Guidelines in Rare Turtle Habitat. <http://www.mass.gov/eea/docs/dfg/nhesp/species-and-conservation/mowing-guidelines.pdf>
- Pollinators in Natural Areas. <http://www.xerces.org/guidelines-pollinators-in-natural-areas/>
- Managing grasslands, shrublands, and young forest habitats for wildlife: A guide for the northeast. [http://www.wildlife.state.nh.us/Wildlife/Northeast\\_Hab\\_Mgt\\_Guide.htm](http://www.wildlife.state.nh.us/Wildlife/Northeast_Hab_Mgt_Guide.htm)