

ELECTRIC CO-OP STATE OF VEGETATION MANAGEMENT BENCHMARK REPORT – 2026

Published by Utility Arborist Association x Bloom Spatial



WHAT 50 ELECTRIC CO-OPS TOLD US ABOUT VEGETATION MANAGEMENT

Co-ops exist because neighbors pooled resources and built something together. **The spirit of building together** inspires confidence, supports teams, and ensures the line is strung.

However, the reality of day-to-day vegetation management (VM) operations is that neighbors have distance between them. **Each co-op is often on its own during its daily operations**, even when surrounded with neighbors who are willing to help.

There's no easy way to know how your patrol schedule, your herbicide program, or your budget compares to co-ops across the country.

This is the problem we set out to tackle. **Bloom Spatial teamed up with the Utility Arborist Association (UAA) to survey electric co-ops.** We talked to teams with under 1,000 miles of line and to teams with over 10,000 miles. Some serve a few thousand members, and others more than 50,000.

What did we want to find out? **How co-ops compare to others across the country.** We asked about co-op staffing, tools, herbicide programs, budget, and the unsolved problems Vegetation Management teams are facing daily.

Fifty co-ops answered, providing real numbers in a report that's intended to provide a look at understanding **how to maximize the potential of co-op VM programs.**

When asked what the sector needs most, one respondent put it simply:

"Communication between co-ops to create an industry standard."

We'll cover who responded, how mature programs actually are, what tools people use, how herbicide programs run, how budgets get set, and the challenges that keep coming up no matter the co-op's size.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Five Headline Findings

92%

describe their programs as balanced, mostly proactive, or fully proactive

66%

point to budget constraints as their #1 challenge, ahead of contractors or staffing

52%

run vegetation management with one or two full-time staff, regardless of co-op size

72%

are still running the program on spreadsheets, even when GIS or dedicated software exist

Benchmarks and Better Data are Needed

The two most requested improvements by co-ops are:
(1) a benchmark against peers, and (2) better data/mapping tools.

Two major things stood out once we had all the answers in:

- 1) **Most co-ops identify their prune cycles as proactive.** The most commonly reported patrol schedule was once every four or five years.
- 2) **Budgets are increasing** faster than the staff and tools behind them, with 64% reporting an increase over the last three years. Most teams have one to two people working with spreadsheets. When we asked what would actually help, the top answer wasn't more people or more money. Instead, co-ops want a way to see how they compare to others.

Bloom Spatial and the UAA built this report so co-ops can make informed decisions to serve their members.

WHO RESPONDED

We heard from a total of 50 co-op representatives. The most common title was Vegetation Management Supervisor.

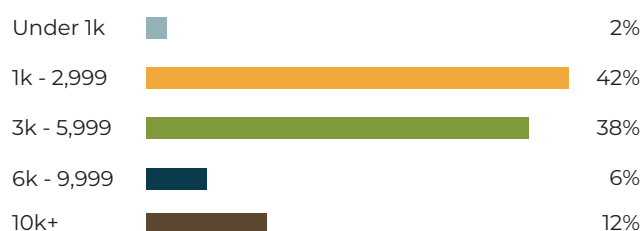
This means **the majority of the data comes from people doing real vegetation work.**

Just over half of our respondents come from teams managing 50,000+ members. We saw early on that co-op size doesn't necessarily predict VM staff size.

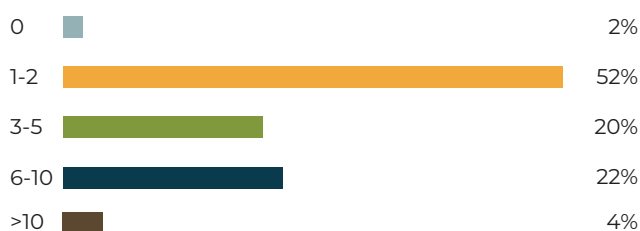
Respondent Role



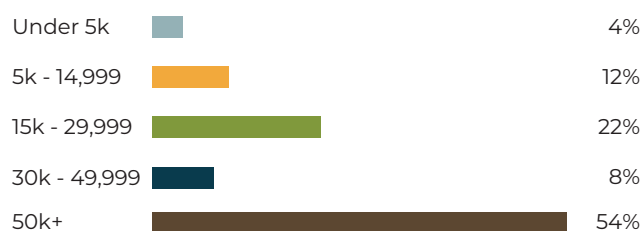
Miles of Line



Full-Time VM Staff



Members Served



PROGRAM MATURITY

The majority of respondents call their approach mostly or fully proactive. A much smaller fraction says they patrol their full system every year.

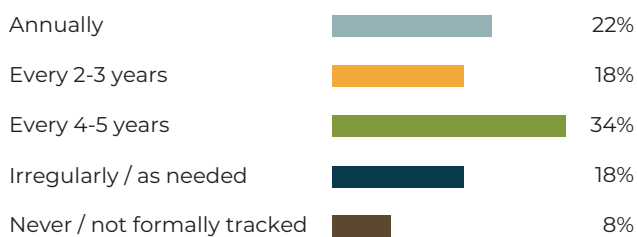
This brings up an interesting question: do you need to see every mile every year, to be truly proactive? Different co-ops have different opinions.

Program maturity also shows up in the back office. The majority of respondents track pruning data systematically in software, while half as many still rely on paper or informal notes.

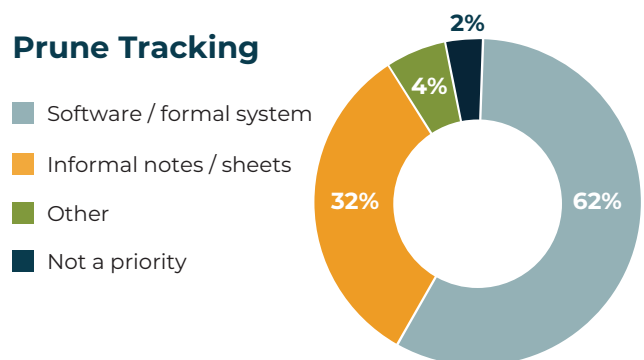
Reactive - Proactive Spectrum



Patrol Frequency

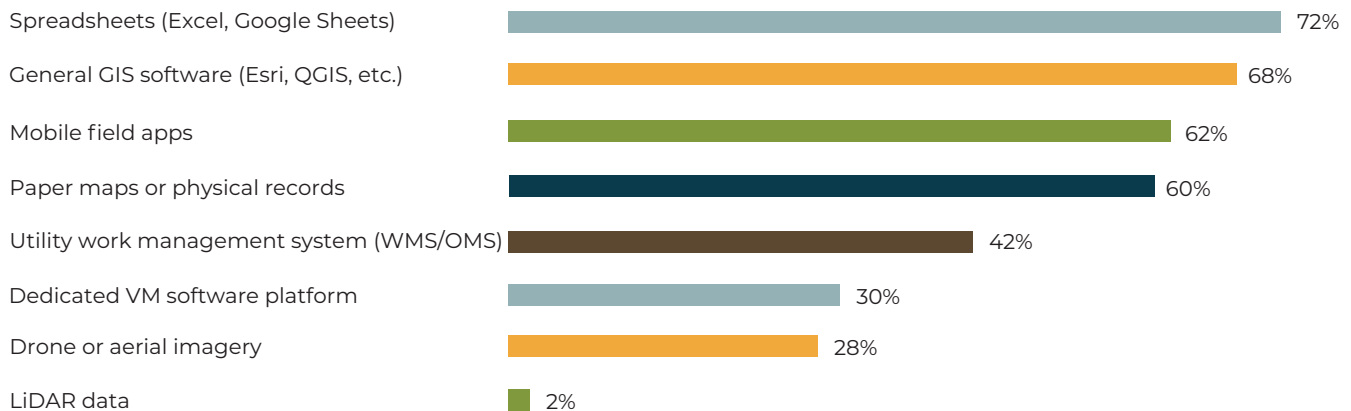


Prune Tracking



TOOLS & TECHNOLOGY ADOPTION

Tools / Platforms Used in Vegetation Management

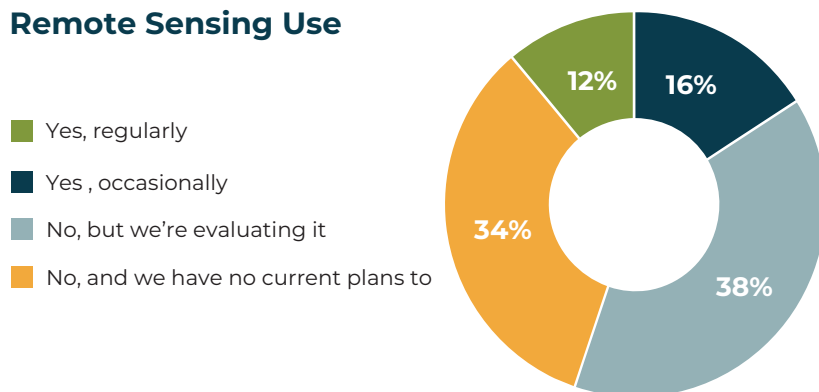


Spreadsheets are still the most common tool, coming in just ahead of GIS software and mobile field apps. One thing in the data becomes clear: Most co-ops run several tools at once instead of one system that does it all.

Drones and LiDAR are still mostly on the sidelines, with **more growing curious about the possibilities of remote sensing data**.

Satisfaction with the current toolset lands at a median 7 out of 10. Co-ops aren't struggling with what they have, they just know there's more out there.

Remote Sensing Use



Toolset Satisfaction

7.0 / 10

Median Rating

1 7 10

Generally Satisfied

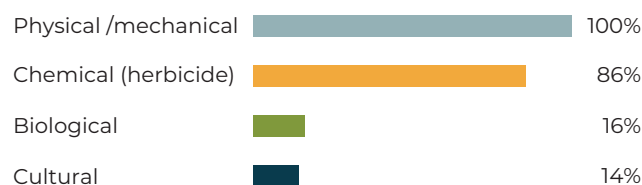
HERBICIDE PROGRAMS

Herbicides are a common part of vegetation management, and are used to complement mechanical clearing methods.

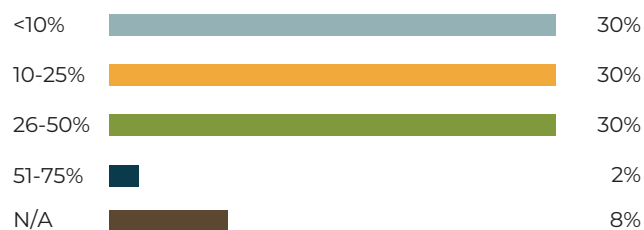
Every co-op in the survey uses physical or mechanical clearing, while about **86% also use chemical treatments**. Most co-ops treat only a portion of their corridors each year, indicating that spraying is typically spread across multiple years rather than handled all at once.

There is no single operating model for herbicide programs. About 42% manage herbicide fully or partly in-house, while 50% rely primarily or fully on contractors. **Contractor availability stands out as the biggest challenge**, which suggests the main industry constraint is having enough partner capacity to carry out the work.

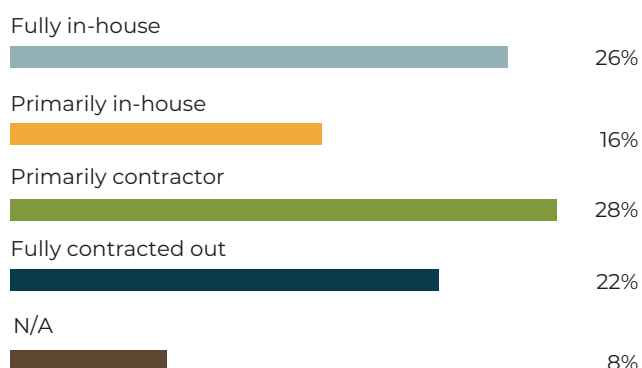
Integrated Vegetation Management (IVM) Control Methods Used



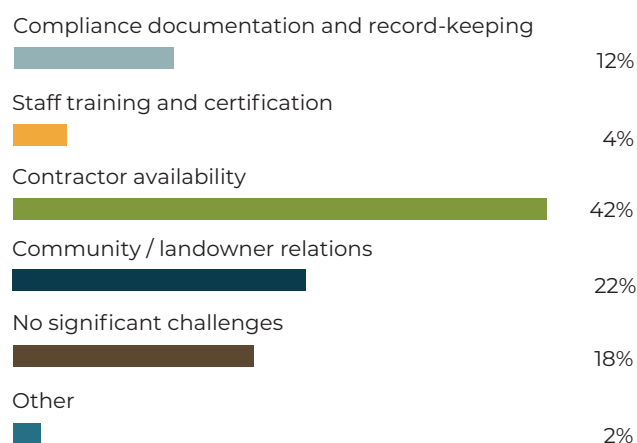
% Corridors Treated Annually



Program Managed by



Biggest Challenge



BUDGET & PLANNING PRACTICES

Estimated Benchmark Stats

\$1.1K*

Annual spend / veg. mile

\$90*

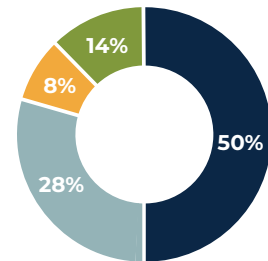
Annual spend / member

*Estimated from survey ranges using representative values

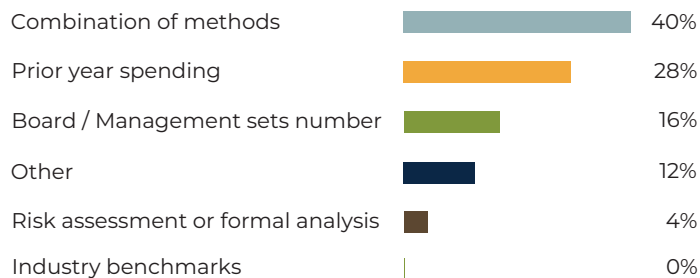
38% do not have real-time visibility into their vegetation management budget

3-Year Budget Trend

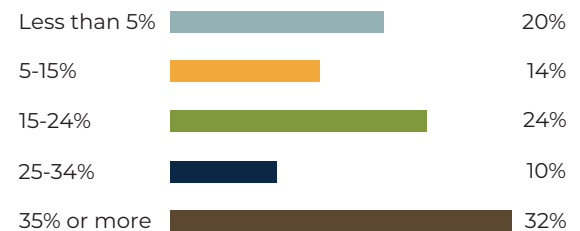
- Increased significantly (>15%)
- Increased slightly (1-15%)
- Stayed roughly the same
- Decreased slightly



How Budget is Set



Percentage of Outages Over Last 3 Years Caused by Vegetation



Budgets are climbing.

Over the last three years, 64% of co-ops report a budget increase, with 14% reporting a significant increase.

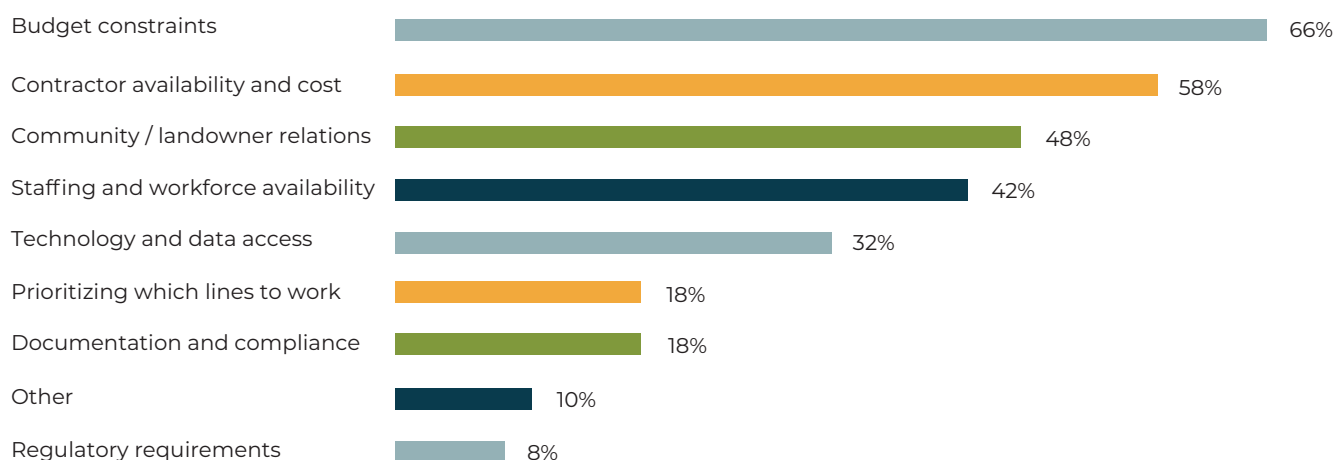
Nearly four in ten do not have real-time visibility into their vegetation management budget. Meanwhile, investment in vegetation management continues to grow. Respondents report that those investments are often based on a combination of methods, with **prior year spend doing most of the heavy lifting.**

We ask: If co-ops are spending more, what's the primary reason for that spending?

Why is real-time budget visibility not more commonplace?

TOP CHALLENGES

Top Challenges, Ranked



VM budgets continue to grow. Budget constraints and contractor availability/cost are also mentioned as top challenges. One possible explanation of higher spend and high contractor costs is that co-ops are spending more money each year to (at least partially) keep up with rising contractor costs. Another possible explanation is that co-ops are using more contractors than they have in the past.

Top challenges following close behind are landowner relations, staffing, and technology access. Proper budget and staffing alone don't guarantee a smooth path forward.

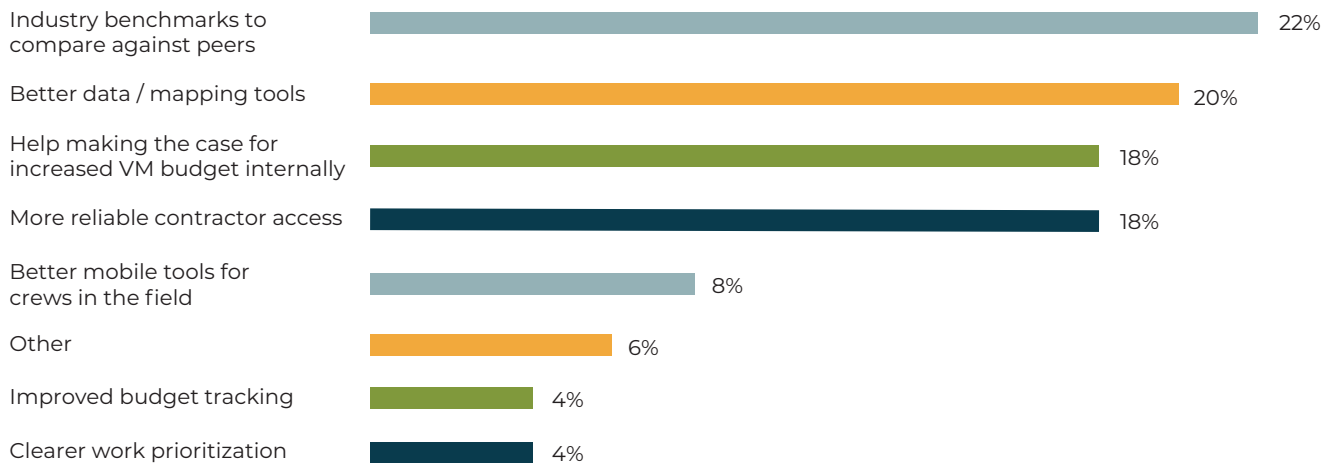
Challenges Straight from Co-ops:

"Being pulled in different directions, impacting the original plan--this may be work plans, make-ready work, or other operational or non-vegetation management priorities. This impacts funding available for planned re-clear work, causing circuits to get pushed."

"Obtain easements for all existing power lines, not just new line extensions. Currently, easements are secured for extension projects, but there are thousands of miles of existing lines without easements. Additionally, many service taps that cross onto private property do not have easements in place."

"How to locate the live but decayed and declining trees outside of ROW that fall in causing outages."

What Would Help Most



When asked what would help most next year, the most common answer is **benchmarks**, not necessarily more staff or more money. Better data and mapping tools were also cited as priorities, which makes sense given the prevalence of spreadsheet use.

Co-ops also want help justifying more VM budget internally. Combined with the finding that 38% lack real-time budget visibility, the results point to a need for greater operational and budget transparency.

What's Working?

Co-ops also told us what's actually paying off right now:

"We use a VM AI software that has been a tremendous help."

"Moved to a 3 year cycle and are cutting exact specs, not existing ROW."

"Contractor relationship and getting into a cycle finally."

Thinking back to top challenges, one word kept coming up: **standards**.

More on that next.

BUILDING STANDARDS

This benchmark report is a joint effort. **Bloom Spatial** ran the survey, talked to the co-ops, and collected the data. The **Utility Arborist Association** is leading the way to create a standards for co-ops to share a common language and inform best practices.

One respondent named this need directly:

“Co-ops all abiding to UAA Best Management Practice and adherence to ANSI Z133 Standards.”

Standardizing Terminology and Reporting

As co-ops work to benchmark performance and measure ROI, one challenge keeps surfacing: everyone needs to be speaking the same language. The UAA and other industry groups are now tackling that gap head-on, working to align reporting methods, reliability metrics, and terminology across the board. Separately, Professor Greg Dahle at West Virginia University is compiling a national database of tree-caused outage (TCO) data, already spanning 35 states, to support this same push toward standardization.

“Future-ready systems depend on more than technology; they depend on a common understanding of the information we use to manage them. By normalizing the language and data definitions used across UVM, we create the foundation for better collaboration, more informed decisions, and stronger stewardship of the infrastructure and ecosystems entrusted to our care.”

Dennis Fallon • Executive Director, Utility Arborist Association

“A clear gap is standardized reporting methods, using the same reliability metrics and terminology. How the IEEE standards are applied to SAIFI (System Average Interruption Frequency Index) and ensuring all co-ops follow that approach matters tremendously for benchmarking, ROI, customer satisfaction, and a variety of metrics.

Using the same terminology for measuring TCOs matters as well. The UAA Research Committee has undertaken work in this area, with a panel of utility experts from across the country working on that task at the UAA. There are two elected directors currently on the Utility Arborist Association Board of Directors who will also bring any cooperative concerns to the Board.”

Cindy Devlin Musick • Sr. Director, Vegetation Management Services • Rappahannock EC

If you're interested in learning more, reach out to Professor Greg Dahle at gregory.dahle@mail.wvu.edu

CLOSING NOTE

Fifty co-ops sharing real numbers about their own operations is a great start for this benchmarking effort.

Thanks to everyone who filled this out, and thanks to the UAA for building this with us. We'd like this to be the first of a few rounds, not the only one.

If you have any questions, suggestions, or ideas of how to improve this study next year, please reach out at contact@bloomspatial.com.

CREDITS

The UAA is an organization of over 5,000 individuals with interest in and a commitment to the maintenance of trees and other vegetation for the purpose of ensuring the safe and reliable distribution of energy, including electric, oil and gas, to businesses and residences.

Bloom Spatial is a Vegetation Management operating system for electric co-ops. No GIS expertise required. Includes risk model (satellite, aerial, LiDAR, drone, and internal utility data), work management system, and mobile field tools. The platform helps prioritize work, manage contractors, and achieve operational and budget transparency.

Design: Sarah Miller Designs

Cover Photograph: SCI-REMC Field Team photographed by Pablo Fuentes