

## **Brown is the New Green: Why Our Lawns Are Brown**

If you hadn't noticed yet, quite a bit of grass at our Whitehall campus is brown. Yes, it's really brown! That doesn't mean we've stopped taking care of our lawns. It's just the first step in the beginning stages of a project to transform several of our lawns into natural landscapes.

We are working on a planned transition from a traditional lawn to a landscape that once was common in the White Lake area – an open prairie. Prairies are scarce in Michigan, having been replaced many years ago mostly by farm fields and pastures. It's important to restore prairies because they provide homes for a number of valuable bird and butterfly species, whose populations have become smaller due to habitat losses.

Eventually, through a natural process termed *succession*, the open prairie will become an oak savannah, a lightly forested grassland, with oaks as the dominant tree species. Over a much longer time period (50 to 100 years), the area will become a mature oak forest. Forests have rich fertile soils and support a variety of beneficial habitat features, from mosses, ferns and wildflowers and shrubs, to valuable tree canopies. The shade, shelter, and protection provided by forests are crucial to wildlife species such as the red fox, hawks, woodpeckers, and songbirds. Not only are the prairie and forest habitats better for wildlife, many people may find the new landscapes more appealing than a traditional lawn. There will also be several attractive rain gardens to help reduce stormwater runoff, walking paths and benches throughout the area, interpretive signs, and a connection to the White Lake Pathway. The native landscape can also serve as an outdoor educational lab for local schools.

This will benefit the White Lake area because it will re-establish habitat for important native wildlife species. Natural landscapes need less chemicals, fertilizers, and water than traditional lawns, which means improvements in local water quality - a strong interest of local citizens.

For us Alcoans, the project means dealing with some small inconveniences in the short-term, like having brown lawns, but in the long-term it means less maintenance, less use of water, chemicals and fertilizers, a reduced possibility of pollution, substantial cost savings, and a more environmentally friendly campus. This is also an opportunity for Alcoa Howmet to demonstrate how corporations can be environmental leaders and a positive example for other companies, government, and individuals.

### **FAQs**

#### **1. Why is Alcoa Howmet doing this?**

To improve the environment and save money.

**2. Who is doing the work?**

The Muskegon Conservation District is leading the project, with assistance from JFNew (a consulting firm), West Michigan Environmental Action Council, and the Wildlife Habitat Council, along with advice from a steering committee of community members.

**3. How long will the project take?**

The project which was begun in 2008, is already ahead of schedule, with completion planned for 2012.

**4. What will replace the lawn?**

An open prairie that will eventually (over many years) become a forest.

**5. What are the benefits to Alcoa Howmet?**

- Less grounds keeping maintenance
- Less use of water, chemicals and fertilizers
- Less chance for pollution
- Significant cost savings (annual grounds keeping expenses)
- Enhanced public image

**6. Why are the lawns brown?**

A biodegradable herbicide was used on one lawn area in 2008 and several other lawn areas this year to remove the turf grass in order to prepare the sites to plant the seeds for the prairie.

**7. When will the native plants be visible?**

New plants should be visible in late July of this year!

**8. What role do employees have?**

Employees can participate in plantings and help with the limited maintenance required for the new landscapes. They can also learn from what is being done and create natural landscapes in their own backyards.

**9. How can we get more information?**

Contact the Muskegon Conservation District at 231-773-0008 or visit [www.muskegoncd.org](http://www.muskegoncd.org) and click on the icon for the White Lake Community Native Landscape Project (scroll down).

Contact Christopher A. Rohrer, CHMM Manager, Environmental Engineering at [Christopher.Rohrer@Alcoa.com](mailto:Christopher.Rohrer@Alcoa.com) or (231) 894-7227.

Pick up a "Landscaping for Water Quality" brochure available in our facility lobbies and break rooms.

Send an email to [tcabala@charter.net](mailto:tcabala@charter.net) to be placed on an email listserv for regular updates.