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Partnership promotes composting

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Don Luepke and Chris Hughes wield chainsaws in mid-August during a massive debris cleanup day at the Clear Lake Nature Preserve.

Photo contributed

The Clear Lake Township Land Conservancy could have burned the piles of debris left from a restoration project on the western edge of Clear Lake Nature Preserve.

A little gasoline, a match — poof. All gone, in what Dr. Suess might call “smogulous smoke.”

Having three giant, smoky fires did not fit the mission of the conservancy, said Executive Director Bridget Harrison.



Instead, the nonprofit conservancy had the material, mostly fallen trees and branches, chipped for mulch by the Northeast Indiana Solid Waste Management District, a public entity supported by property taxes.

Over two days in mid-August, the NISWMD pulverized the debris with a tub grinder after Charlie Crowl Jr. of Ridenour Farms coalesced three piles of cottonwood trees into one.

“It was a coordinated effort and it was incredible to watch from a distance,” said Harrison.

The trees were taken out as part of a project by Blue Heron Ministries, which is assisting the CLTLC in restoring a former farmstead to a natural ecosystem. The field was acquired in 2015 through Richard and Jill Waterfield, the Clear Lake Community Fund at the Steuben County Community Foundation, an anonymous donor and a grant from the Bicentennial Nature Trust.

The debris needed to be cleared from the field to ensure good seed-to-soil contact when the area is seeded this winter with pollinator plants through the state Grasslands for Gamebirds and Songbirds Initiative.

In January, Moody and Crew of Fremont pushed the debris into large piles. CLTLC volunteers and Crowl helped during the two-day mulching adventure last month.

“It was an opportunity to promote composting and make use of mulch,” said NISWMD Executive Director Steve Christman.

Some of the mulch was used on preserve trails. Trails will eventually expand into the field to create a two-mile figure-eight that goes through the grasses and flowers as well as tall, mature trees and an overlook of a restored fen on the east side of the preserve, 24 wooded and wetland acres donated by the Brennan family in 2009.

The excess mulch was taken by Pridgeon Farms of Montgomery, Michigan, which provided a large dump truck and hauled the material away.

The project showed how even debris of epic proportions can be handled and returned to a useful product, said Christman.

In the four-county NISWMD area, yard waste materials can be taken to compost lots. They are open from mid-April through mid-November and after the holiday season for live Christmas trees. There is one in each county. Go to niswmd.org/yard-waste for the specific locations and more details about the program.

“These locations offer a place for residents to divert grass, leaves and brush; and when available, residents can get mulch and compost to use in their landscaping and gardens,” says the web site. Finished compost has been screened to help create a cleaner product and, when available, can be purchased for \$10 a cubic yard.
