

STRENGTHENING FARM BILL PROGRAMS TO PROTECT POLLINATORS AND THEIR HABITAT

Coevolution Institute Recommendations

The Coevolution Institute (CoE) recommends that existing farm bill conservation, forest management, research and other programs designed to work with and assist farm, ranch and forest land managers be strengthened to better address managed and native pollinator needs by adding targeted authorizing language to current program authorities in the next farm bill. This is a pragmatic approach that can yield meaningful results with limited resources without creating new programs. Conservation authorities and other selected programs in the farm bill can be highly effective in addressing factors which are contributing to pollinator declines including: habitat fragmentation, loss, and degradation causing a reduction of food sources and sites for mating, nesting, roosting, and migration; improper use of pesticides and herbicides; aggressive competition from non-native species; disease, predators, and parasites; climate change; and lack of floral diversity.

The focused objective of targeted modifications to authorizing language is to better equip and direct USDA agencies to build on these current pollinator-related efforts and do better. Pollinators, agriculture and healthy ecosystems deserve no less. This can be accomplished by inserting modest language changes as appropriate to ensure agencies have the direction and authority in implementing programs to (1) improve awareness about the importance of pollinators to agricultural producers and ecosystem health, and (2) work with farmers, ranchers and foresters in facilitating pollinator stewardship, protection and habitat conservation.

Conservation Programs Can Be “Pollinated”

Candidate programs include EQIP, the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), the Conservation Security Program, the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, the Farm and Ranchlands Protection Program, the Grasslands Reserve Program, the Wetlands Reserve Program and the Watershed Rehabilitation Program, all capably operated by NRCS. Examples:

EQIP Example: In authorizing language for EQIP [P.L. 107-171, Subtitle D], additional direction and clarification of authority regarding pollinators could be provided through insertion of “or pollinators” at the end of Section 1240(b), (e)(2), so that it would read:

“In determining the amount and rate of incentive payments, the Secretary may accord great significance to a practice that promotes residue, nutrient, pest invasive species, ~~or~~ air quality management, **or pollinator habitat and protection.**”

It would then be clear that the statutory authority and direction exists to provide EQIP incentive payments to help producers meet part of the costs of pollinator-friendly practices. Pollinator protection could be added as a credit in scoring applications for cost-share assistance. Report language could be included to encourage and direct conservation assistance providers to make producers aware of pollinator needs and pollinator-friendly practices when appropriate.

CSP Example: Authorizing language can make it clear that incorporating pollinator-friendly practices is an important component of criteria to be used in determining CSP payments.

Priority Resource Concern—CoE recommends that pollinator protection be designated as a Priority Resource Concern. For example, Congress could direct NRCS to include pollinator protection as a national priority resource concern for its conservation implementation programs—preferably at the national level, but at least as appropriate at the regional, state or local level.

Seed & Nursery Stock for Pollinator-Friendly Native Plants— CoE recommends adding report language to strengthen the availability of seed and nursery stock for native plants. NRCS has some good efforts underway to make producers and other land managers aware of pollinator-friendly native plants. One reported obstacle is a chronic shortage of seed and nursery stock for native plants.

Other USDA Programs Can Be “Pollinated”

Forestry—Conservation assistance programs and natural resource programs operated by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) could be similarly augmented. For example, the MOU between CoE and USFS identifies common ground in programs dealing with healthy forests, invasive species and resource valuation and use.

Research and Extension—Direction could be given under the Research Title to strengthen the Agricultural Research Service (ARS) and Cooperative State, Research, Extension and Education Service (CSREES) focus on pollinators, consistent with recommendations of the National Academy of Sciences report on the Status and Health of Pollinators in North America. ARS was a major funder of this important study and should act on the report’s recommendations.

Extension & Gardeners—Recognizing that cooperative extension and conservation district offices increasingly provide information and technical assistance to urban and suburban homeowners and gardeners, legislative and report language in the farm bill could be strengthened to ensure that such assistance increases awareness about pollinators and integrates the critical needs of pollinators and their habitat. This could include pollinator-beneficial information on habitat—such as appropriate native planting successions, nesting sites, water sources and shelter—and integrated pest management practices that minimize harm to pollinators.

Ag in the Classroom—CoE recommends that language be included to direct or encourage USDA to add a pollinator component to this excellent education program, helping to make students aware of the vital role of pollinators in their food supply and healthy ecosystems. The American Farm Bureau Federation has expressed interest in such an effort. The North American Pollinator Protection Campaign (NAPPC), a tri-national collaboration facilitated by NAPPC, recently released “*Nature’s Partners: A Comprehensive Pollinator Curriculum for Grades 3-6.*”

Backyard Conservation—CoE recommends that language be included to encourage NRCS to review and strengthen pollinator-related aspects of its “*Backyard Conservation,*” “*Conservation Where You Live,*” “*Hands on the Land,*” “*Tidbits for Teachers and Students*” and other education and outreach initiatives.

Integration & Coordination

Integrated Approach to Resource Management—Appropriate legislative and/or report language could be added to help accelerate the goal of moving away from a ‘stovepipe,’ single resource focus in conservation practices to a more integrated approach of achieving multiple resource goals. Effective pollinator protection practices often overlap and complement other conservation practices, particularly those designed to improve wildlife habitat, and vice versa. In other instances, a practice designed to achieve wildlife or other conservation practices could generate significant pollinator benefits by integrating modest enhancements. For example, a best management practice designed to reduce soil erosion properly designed can also help address other resource concerns such as pollinator habitat, wildlife and carbon sequestration. This is more efficient and effective for farmers and ranchers, resource protection and federal government programs.

Inter- and Intra-Agency Coordination—Report language could be included to encourage and require agencies to focus and better coordinate existing programs, both within USDA and with other agencies, to address pollinator needs.

Public-Private Collaboration—Report language could be included to encourage leveraging of limited resources through public-private partnerships involving stakeholders sharing similar objectives, such as with the Coevolution Institute.

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