

# Government Relations Update



by Zac Browning, ABF Past President



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ABF Past President

*The following is a letter written by Zac Browning regarding conservation and habitat that he handed to Congressional leaders and Ag committee members on his recent visit to Washington, D.C., representing the ABF.*

It is in the economic interest of agricultural producers and American consumers to ensure a healthy, sustainable population of native and managed pollinators, including managed honey bees. Pollinators are essential to the production of an estimated one third of the human diet and to the reproduction of at least 80 percent of flowering plants. Insect-pollinated agricultural commodities result in significant income for agricultural producers and account for \$20 billion in U.S. agricultural output yearly.

Critical habitat loss has posed a major challenge to honey bee health and colony numbers in recent years, posing a substantial threat to pollination. Honey bees require a rich supply of nectar and pollen from blooming trees, shrubs and plants in order to thrive. Changes in farming practices, wide scale herbicide usage, urban sprawl and altered land management policies have each significantly reduced the amount of sustainable habitat available for honey bees.

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) has provided millions of acres of valuable habitat for honey bees since the late 1980s and has, at times, effectively buffered honey bees from the effects of habitat loss. This is true throughout the country but especially in the upper Midwest and Northern Plains, where, perhaps, as many as 40 percent of the nation's honey bee colonies spend the summer. Honey bees are transported to the Midwest following winter and spring pollination deployment to the south or coasts, areas which lack critical habitat components needed to support large numbers of hives for the long term. CRP lands, with abundant acres of legume-rich forage, have offered the hives a safe haven from the pressure of modern agriculture where they can be revitalized after their rigorous pollination activities and be readied to again provide vital pollinators when and where they are needed.

The effects of time and altered conservation policies are affecting the value of conservation lands for honey bees.

In recent years, CRP lands have deteriorated in value to honey bees as the nectar and pollen-rich plants succumb to grass, weeds and herbicides intended to control weeds overtime. Millions of acres of CRP lands have been converted back to farmland in recent years, while millions more acres are being re-enrolled in the program. In many cases, though, this happens without provisions to restore beneficial plants needed for honey bees. Furthermore, efforts to boost pollinator habitat through conservation programs have not kept pace with losses.

It is imperative that the benefits of CRP be recognized in planning for the future of CRP and other conservation programs. Since its inception, CRP has been a valuable resource for honey bees and other pollinators. Provisions in the 2008 Farm Bill mandated that the effect on pollinators be considered for all conservation programs. This is fitting since conservation lands, such as CRP acreage, provide prime habitat for these pollinators.

Without the benefit of the past and existing CRP acres in these areas, it is certain that the U.S. honey bee shortage would be even worse. It is of no small coincidence that North Dakota, the U.S. leader in honey production, has nearly doubled its hive numbers since the 1980s when the CRP program began there.

The American Beekeeping Federation strongly encourages the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to continue its commitment to pollinator habitat through conservation programs and recommends focus on the following priorities:

- As a primary stake holder in pollinator concerns, a contact/liason from the honey bee industry should be established to advise the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) on policies affecting pollinator conservation.
- Pollinator-friendly seed mixes need to be affordable in order to be widely utilized. Seed mixes for CRP containing alfalfa and sweet clover were popular in some areas in the past. These plants are excellent sources of nectar and pollen for honey bees and other pollinators. While these plants are not native, they are widely used in agriculture and wildlife management, as they are affordable legumes that provide clear benefits to soil, water and wildlife.

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