

A close-up photograph of a honeybee on a cluster of small, light purple flowers. The bee is positioned in the center, facing left, with its head buried in a flower. The background is a soft-focus field of similar flowers.

USDA to Invest \$4 Million for Honeybee Food Sources on Private Lands

The USDA has made \$4 million in assistance available to help farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners provide food sources for honeybees on private lands in six Midwestern and Northern Plains states, including North Dakota.

Honeybees play a critical role in crop production, but have suffered significant declines in recent years. This targeted conservation effort by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) aims to improve the health of honeybees in a region where more than two-thirds of the U.S. population spend the summer months pollinating crops and building strength.

Honeybees pollinate an estimated \$15 billion worth of crops annually, including more than 130 fruits and vegetables. One out of every three bites of food in the United States depends on honeybees and other pollinators.

Planting wildflowers, native grasses, and cover crops like buckwheat, clover, and sunflowers provides high-value food for honeybees. Cover crops that flower can provide nectar and pollen as food for pollinators. Cover crops can also provide structure that other beneficial insects, such as predators and parasitoids need for cover, reproduction, and over wintering. NRCS works with landowners to ensure pasturelands and rangelands include a good variety of legumes and forbs that also provide pollen and nectar.

These conservation improvements not only benefit the bees, they strengthen agricultural operations, support other beneficial insects and wildlife, and improve other natural resources. Appropriate cover crops and better rangeland and pasture management reduce erosion, increase soil health, inhibit the expansion of invasive species, and provide food and habitat for insects and wildlife.

Several changes to practice implementation and management requirements have occurred, making the program more flexible and inclusive for participants. In North Dakota, producers are now allowed to graze cover crops if following a prescribed grazing plan. The required amount of flowering plants in a cover crop mix has been reduced from 75 percent to 50 percent. The NRCS has also decreased the amount of forbs required in hayland plantings to 25 percent and will allow haying of 50 percent of the field when at 10 percent bloom. For producers planting conservation cover, the requirement to have 75 percent honeybee forage has been reduced to 40 percent. Producers planting native forage and biomass under this program will be allowed to seed up to 60 percent grasses in their mixes, which is a change from the 25 percent maximum the previous year.

One common practice under the honeybee pollinator funding is prescribed grazing, which refers to the controlled harvest of native or introduced forages using grazing livestock. Livestock are managed so the intensity, frequency, and timing of grazing events maintains or improves grazing land health. Intensity refers to the number of animals per



acre. Frequency refers to the number of times a herd grazes a pasture in a given year. Timing refers to when the animals are allowed to graze in relation to the growth stage of the cool or warm season plants available. Prescribed grazing generally promotes adequate recovery periods between grazing events, and 50-60 percent forage use. With properly managed grazing, plant species richness can be maintained or improved, resulting in elevated soil health, greater forage quality and quantity, improved water quality, and potentially increased economic return.

Just as prescribed grazing improves livestock opportunities, prescribed grazing also results in improved habitat for nearly all wildlife. Most invertebrates, reptiles, amphibians, birds, and mammals thrive in well-managed grazing lands, as they offer quality food, water, shelter, and space. Many lands managed for wildlife are well served by a prescribed grazing plan focused on habitat management, usually targeting a particular wildlife species. This can include more intense grazing optimized for prairie bird species preferring low grasses. Less intense grazing can offer quality brood habitat for upland birds as well as fawning habitat for deer and antelope. Grazing may also be timed to maximize forb blossoms for domestic bees, native pollinators, or butterflies.

The 2014 Farm Bill's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) provides funding for this work. NRCS accepts EQIP applications on a continuous basis. Applications received on or before Feb. 19 will be considered for funding in the first application period. A second application period will occur on May 20 if funds are available.

Landowners interested in participating should contact their local USDA service center to learn more.

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