

Farm pollinators important

By Janet Lagler

Natural Resources Conservation Service

One out of every three mouthfuls of food and drink we consume is available because of pollinators. Although there are many animals that play a role in the pollination of our food, bees are the most important of these.

Eighty-seven of the world's 124 most commonly cultivated crops are animal pollinated and insect-pollinated forage plants such as alfalfa and clover provide feed for livestock.

□ Historically, the ag industry has used managed hives of European Honey Bees for pollination. With the recent decline of this species, it is important to diversify the pollinators we use for crop production and supply valuable pollinator habitat. This habitat benefits both native bees and honey bees.

When planning habitat to attract Native Pollinators, plan to provide the basics: food, shelter, and insecticide protection.

□ Food includes pollen and nectar from flowers. It is beneficial to plant pollinator-friendly flowering plants to attract native bees. Plantings should include native plants with varied bloom periods.

□ These plantings can be part of field borders, vegetative barriers, contour buffer strips, waterways, shelterbelts, windbreaks, conservation corners, riparian forest and herbaceous buffers.

□ There are certain criteria for establishing pollinator habitat. Areas will be at least half-acre in size for each 40 acres of cropland, pastureland, rangeland or forest land and include a minimum of nine flowering plant species.

The habitat planning must include a minimum of three plants from each bloom period.

□ Site preparation and plant establishment shall be accomplished according to the appropriate NRCS conservation practice and specifications. Management and/or maintenance activities such as mowing, haying, burning, or grazing must be conducted outside of the flowering season or bloom period.

In order to keep wildflower and pollinator habitat in a highly diverse condition, some form of regular management will be needed every three to five years.

□ There are three types of bees and nesting habits: ground-nesting, wood-nesting, and cavity-nesting native bees.

Be sure to include areas in the pollinator habitat such as un-mowed wild areas, limit the tillage in and around the habitat area, and encourage open or bare soil.

□ When designing pollinator habitat, remember to manage for both pollinators and plants. To protect the pollinators, avoid or minimize tillage, insecticides and some fungicides, plastic mulch, and removal of beneficial plants.

□ Pollinator plantings provide a food source and secure nesting for ground-nesting bees by

establishing a variety of flowering plants. Use conservation cover, field borders, early succession habitat and tree/shrub establishment.

No-till planting protects ground-nesting pollinators by reducing ground disturbance. Pest management practices protect pollinators. Buffer planting in marginal areas around organic farms can include pollinator plantings.

The USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) provides financial and technical assistance. Programs such as Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), the Grasslands Reserve Program (GRP), the Wetland Reserve Program (WRP), Agriculture Management Assistance (AMA) and the Conservation Security Program (CSP)—can help agricultural producers establish pollinator-friendly native species plantings.

For information, contact your local NRCS office at 352-4776 ext. 3. ☐ Plan to attend the Southwest Nebraska Area Habitat Tour on June 21 from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. MT at the Mid-Plains Community College 1324 Broadway, Imperial.

☐ For details and to register please visit: www.NebraskaPF.com or call Pam at 308-850-8395.