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JOHN HOLDEN

# USDA Program Aims To Aid Pollinators

BY RITA BRHEL  
P&D Correspondent

It's been nine years since Colony Collapse Disorder first made headlines, not only in the beekeeping community but also to the masses with reports speculating the effects of this mysterious, sudden disappearance of millions of honey bees on future supermarket prices.

Yet honey bees are continuing to suffer.

“Pollinators are struggling,” said John Holden, director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy in Washington, D.C. “Last year, beekeepers report losing about 40 percent of honey bee colonies, threatening the viability of their livelihoods and the essential pollination services their bees provide to agriculture.”

There has been a silver lining to the waning health of honey bees: an exponentially increased awareness of the importance – and fragility – of natural pollinators to the agricultural industry, not only in the United States but worldwide.

“Pollinators are critical to the nation's economy, food security and environmental health,” Holden said. “Honey bee pollination alone adds more than \$15 billion in value to agricultural crops each year and helps ensure that our diets include ample fruits, nuts and vegetables.”

The decline of indigenous species, like native bees or monarch butterflies, for example, are now more than simply a threat to the somewhat-abstract, moral concept of biodiversity. Because of the dangers publicized about the possible future loss of the non-native honey bee, losing these native species counts more in the logical half of the brain: The loss of a pollinator is now seen as an immediate risk to the well-being of humankind, to the future of the food supply.

Perhaps like never before, the agricultural industry is championing the value of natural pollinators, from honey bees, native bees and monarchs to other insects, birds and bats – so much so that the U.S. Department of Agriculture has recently released a strategy to promote pollinator health.

The three-pronged strategy aims to: reduce honey bee colony losses to economically sustainable levels; increase monarch butterfly numbers to protect the annual migration; and restore or enhance pollinator habitat on public and private property.

“Increasing the quantity and quality of habitat for pollinators is a major part of this effect,” Holden said, “with actions ranging from the construction of pollinator gardens at federal buildings to the restoration of millions of acres of federally managed lands with similar actions on private lands.”

He further encourages the public to plant pollinator gardens at their home or place of business, to consider setting aside natural habitat on their properties and to follow instructions on pesticide labels.



PHOTO: METRO GRAPHICS

But Scott Hoffman Black, executive director of the Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation in Portland, Ore., said that success of the USDA strategy relies on adequate funding and appropriate implementation.

“Pollinator conservation is an issue of national importance, and I am very pleased that the White House has taken a leadership role,” he added. “We will continue to work with and support the White House and federal agencies as they move forward.”

In particular, the Xerces Society has been working with the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service in providing pollinator training, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on monarch conserva-

tion projects, and the U.S. Forest Service and U.S. Bureau of Land Management on conservation projects for rare butterflies.

“Working closely with the NRCS and other agencies has shown me that these agencies are full of highly skilled and motivated staff,” said Mace Vaughan, Pollinator Program co-director at the Xerces Society and pollinator conservation specialist for NRCS. “I am confident that implementation of the White House strategy will be in good hands.”

Still, Black said, the USDA strategy does not adequately address protecting pollinators from pesticides, especially the neonicotinoids.

“Neonicotinoids are the most

widely used insecticides in the world, and there are demonstrated links between their use and declines in bees and other wildlife,” he said. “We had hoped that the [U.S.] Environmental Protection Agency would take strong comprehensive action to address the risk that these insecticides pose to pollinators.”

“The national strategy includes valuable long-term plans that could, over time, strengthen the pesticide regulatory system,” added Aimee Code, Pesticide Program coordinator at the Xerces Society. “But it fails to offer pesticide mitigations to address issues currently facing pollinators.”

## Tougher US Food Safety Law Yet To Produce Overhaul

BY MICHAEL A. LINDENBERGER AND KAREN ROBINSON-JACOBS  
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WASHINGTON — Four years ago, President Barack Obama signed into law sweeping changes designed to improve U.S. food safety and prevent outbreaks similar to the one involving Brenham, Texas-based Blue Bell, in which three people have died after eating contaminated ice cream.

The Food Safety Modernization Act, the biggest food safety overhaul since 1938, came in response to a 46-state outbreak tied to salmonella at a Georgia peanut plant in 2008. Nine people died, and every year since, thousands have died from food-borne illnesses.

The new law is supposed to change that. It shifts the focus from merely reacting to deadly outbreaks to preventing them.

That is, if it can ever get implemented.

It has taken four years, more than 75,000 public comments and a federal court order to enable the Food and Drug Administration to write the broad new rules that will govern how thousands of food manufacturers like Blue Bell will ensure their food is safe to eat.

When the rules are finalized later this year, companies will have up to three years to comply, depending on their size.

But the new law still won't require companies to test their food for bacteria, even if, as Blue Bell did in 2013, they find that potentially deadly bacteria is alive and growing in their plant.

The new law makes hundreds of changes. But in almost all cases, it still leaves it up to companies to decide whether they need to test the food they make for bacteria before they put it on trucks and sell it.

“There is no one-size-fits-all system of preventive controls,” Mike Taylor, the FDA's deputy commissioner for food safety, told *The Dallas Morning News* this month. “But also we don't want to stymie innovation.”

“We are trying to walk the line to keep the flexibility that folks need to put in place the right efficient, effective preventive control ... but also create accountability for firms to do this the right way.”

### A ‘RECALL SITUATION’

Texas health officials first got word that there might be a problem with Blue Bell ice cream on Feb. 13. By early April, they thought the problems had been resolved. But then a follow-up test netted a surprise: a big and growing sample of *Listeria* found directly in the plant's ice cream.

“That's when we called and said, ‘This is bigger than we thought,’” said Carrie Williams, spokeswoman for the Texas Department of Health Services. “We told them this is a recall situation.”

Blue Bell, which recently announced layoffs and furloughs for most of its workforce, recalled all of its products. The CDC said 10 people have become ill from the ice cream since 2010 in Texas, Kansas, Oklahoma and Arizona. Three of the Kansas patients, all already hospitalized for other conditions, died.

The FDA has said Blue Bell knew in 2013 that at least one of its plants had tested positive for *Listeria*. But the company chose not to tell state or federal officials or test its ice cream to learn if it was still safe.

“They just killed the *Listeria* that they found in a small area,” said Mansour Samadpour, a former University of Washington microbiologist who is president and CEO of IEH Laboratories and Consulting Group. “They did not address the bigger question of why was it there, where did it come from?”

Companies often get bad advice and don't bother to test food after *Listeria* is found in their plants, he said. “If it's in the plant,” he said, “it's going to be in the food.”

It's that decision to not test that has most blackened Blue Bell's eye, said Rep. Joe Barton, R-Texas. “Look what has happened with Blue Bell,” said Barton, one of just three

## Commentary

# Yes, Urban Farming A Real Thing

BY RITA BRHEL  
P&D Correspondent

“Urban farming” sounds like a misnomer. Isn't farming a rural activity, something that requires acres upon acres to grow crops and livestock? It would be impossible to fit the number of acres of any traditional farm inside city limits.

But if you haven't heard this term before, you probably will, soon. The urban farming movement is spreading from city to city like any trend tends to do. The point of urban farming is to encourage local food systems in an effort to respond to the growing need presented by “food deserts,” the USDA term for an area where residents – particularly low-income individuals and families – do not have access to healthy, fresh foods.

Being that much of South Dakota and Nebraska is rural, and not all small towns have a grocery store, and convenience stores don't count as outlets of healthy foods, we have our fair share of food deserts right here in the Yankton area.

You can check out the USDA Food Deserts Mapping tool at [www.ers.usda.gov/data/fooddesert](http://www.ers.usda.gov/data/fooddesert), but I'll break it down for you, too:

- Yankton, Bon Homme, Cedar, much of Clay and Eastern Knox counties are in the clear. I guess you could say we're in a food “oasis.”

- But Western Knox County and the Vermillion area are dubbed food deserts, where most residents are more than one mile from a super-



Rita BRHEL

market. A mile may not seem like that big of a deal, until you have to walk it carrying a couple bags of groceries, which the reality for some low-income individuals and families who have little or no access to vehicle use or public transportation.

- Furthermore, the USDA tool allows you to change search parameters a bit, such as finding food deserts where most residents are more than just a one-half

mile from a supermarket – because that is still a long way to lug a couple bags of groceries. With this search filter on, the city of Vermillion lights up.

So if you live in Western Knox County or the Vermillion area of Clay County, especially Vermillion itself, read on: You, in particular, may be interested in joining this urban farming movement.

It's not clear who first coined the term “urban farming,” but the practice seems to be as old as the hills. More formally known as urban agriculture, it has been practiced since ancient times in Egypt. More recently, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson encouraged urban farming during World War I to promote first self-sufficiency and later a way to feed allied troops in war-torn Europe. A similar practice was promoted dur-

ing the Great Depression to provide food and job to individuals and families in need. Again, during World War II, urban farming was touted through the National Victory Garden Program. It's estimated that more than 500 million pounds of produce was grown during World War I, more than \$2.8 million worth of food was produced during the Depression and more than 9 million pounds of fruit and vegetables were grown per year during the second World War.

Then, the urban farming movement went silent until decades later, as the sustainability movement came to rise, so did urban farming.

City Sprouts is an organization in Omaha, Neb., that promotes urban farming. It was established in 1995. I never heard of it until the Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Society featured it during its 2015 Healthy Farms Conference in Omaha. You can learn more about City Sprouts at <http://omahasprouts.org>. It provides programs to teach Omaha residents, particularly those in the North Omaha food desert, to grow vegetables, flowers and herbs in order to empower people to grow their own healthy foods and develop entrepreneurial skills.

I think sometimes it's easy to look at ideas like urban farming like its just a fad, or just a city thing, but urban farming – basically learning how to garden and grow your own fruits and vegetables – can be part of how our society helps people to learn to help themselves and their families. And there's nothing fad about that.