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White House issues plan to save bees, other crop pollinators

By Geoffrey Mohan

The federal government will boost research and preserve 7 million acres of habitat for bees, monarch butterflies and other insects as part of a wide-ranging strategy to bolster the population of pollinators that are vital to the nation's food crops.

The long-anticipated national strategy from a White House task force aims to bring annual bee losses to 15%, down from more than 40% last year. Managed honeybee colonies provide pollination services to the nation's crops that are valued at \$15 billion, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

California almond growers pay upward of \$290 million a year to bring tens of thousands of managed honeybee colonies to their groves, according to the USDA. A recent survey of the nation's beekeepers estimated annual losses of 42%, up from 35.2% the year



The White House on Tuesday released a national strategy to address precipitous declines in the population of honeybees, which are crucial to pollinating food crops. (Andy Duback / Associated Press)

before, and well above the 15%-17% that is considered economically sustainable.

Much of the plan depends on public-private partnerships, education and research. But it also directs multiple agencies to take action, such as managing land in ways that promote pollinator habitats. The Environmental Protection Agency, meanwhile, is weighing the effects of pesticides on honeybees used to pollinate crops, and already is slowing the use of neonicotinoid compounds that have been associated with colony declines.

The USDA will use its Conservation Reserve Program and other tools to expand summer forage areas, according to the plan.

There are about 2,000-3,000 commercial U.S. beekeepers nationwide, managing about 2.7 million colonies, down from about 5.7 million in the 1950s, according to the report.

Declines in managed bee colonies have been noted for decades, but they increased in the late 1980s due to a parasitic mite infestation, and accelerated sharply about 10 years ago, when whole colonies began to collapse, a phenomenon dubbed colony collapse disorder. Annual losses have hovered in the 30% range since then.

The cause of the sharp declines has been attributed to multiple stressors, including beekeeper management practices, pesticide exposure, poor nutrition due to decreased diversity in their forage, and exposure to a host of pathogens, including mites and viruses.

A task force will try to advance scientific research into causes of the declines, and to better quantify those reported declines, which are based on self-reporting surveys of a small sample of beekeepers.

The Pollinator Research Action Plan that accompanied the White House strategy calls on federal agencies to measure field-level exposure to pesticides and other chemicals and bolster research into the effects of those compounds. Those agencies will develop monitoring protocols for diseases, and identify new control methods for pests and pathogens, with a particular focus on the natural microbiome of the insects.

The plan goes beyond the honeybees used for commercial purposes, examining the more than 4,000 other species of bees and a variety of other pollinators, including butterflies.

The strategy was largely welcomed by the beekeeping industry, even as environmental groups criticized it as not going far enough, particularly in addressing the use of pesticides.

The American Honey Producers Assn. and the American Beekeepers Assn., in a joint statement, said they were “hopeful that the United States Congress will do its part in helping to ensure results rather than rhetoric by providing the resources needed to combat this most serious of threats to honey bee health, the beekeeping industry, and production agriculture.”

The federal government should move faster to “drastically cut down on today’s pervasive use of neonicotinoids and other pesticides,” said Peter Lehner, executive director of the Natural Resources Defense Council.

“Our bees can’t wait for more reports and evaluations. We need to save them by banning neonicotinoids, and especially neonicotinoid seed treatments, right now,” said Lori Ann Burd, director of the Environmental Health program at the Center for Biological Diversity.

The Pesticide Action Network called the strategy “a far cry from the ‘all hands on deck’ approach President Obama had promised to the public last year.” It blasted federal policy as “lop-sided,” taking action on such issues as habitat and pathogens while “remaining stuck” on pesticide control.