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CONSERVATION RESERVE PROGRAM OFFERS POLLINATOR HABITAT INCENTIVES

New rules passed by the USDA now offer financial incentives for the establishment of pollinator habitat through the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). The limited time program sign-up, which opens today to new enrollments, provides one of the largest pollinator conservation opportunities ever in the United States.

The CRP program, first established in 1985, is the largest private landowner conservation effort in the United States with up to 32 million acres eligible for enrollment through the USDA's Farm Service Agency. Program participants take highly erodible land out of crop production, and establish permanent vegetation to protect topsoil and provide wildlife cover. Contracts which run 10 to 15 years provide annual rental payments on enrolled land, and cost-share assistance for establishing vegetative cover.

New rules which go into effect today offer priority ranking for land enrollments that include pollinator-friendly wildflowers and shrubs. Under the current CRP enrollment system, landowners who want to participate are ranked against one another to prioritize enrollments that offer the most conservation benefits. To receive a higher score on the pollinator ranking criteria, participating farmers must plant at least 10% of the CRP acres in wildflower parcels (or at least one acre for CRP enrollments less than 10 acres in size).

The addition of a pollinator habitat incentive for CRP has been promoted by numerous wildlife and pollinator conservation groups in recent years, and the new ranking system now offers one of the largest potential habitat creation opportunities of its kind ever for native bees, butterflies, and managed honey bees, all of which have experienced significant decline in recent years due to habitat loss and other factors.

In developing the new CRP technical requirements, the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) worked closely with Dr. Marla Spivak, a leading honey bee researcher based at the University of Minnesota, and the California-based advocacy group, Partners for Sustainable Pollination. Now, as the enrollment period for new CRP contracts begins, the NRCS is working with the non-profit Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation to develop wildflower seeding recommendations for states like Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, and Oregon. Those recommendations will

focus on selecting native wildflower species that are abundant pollen and nectar sources, and that are most likely to thrive in their respective regions.

Rural landowners interested in more information about CRP, including the current sign-up period which ends August 27th, should contact their local Farm Service Agency office. For location information, visit their web site at <http://www.fsa.usda.gov> .
