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## Keeping Bees in CRP

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## Keeping Bees in CRP

### Abstract

Over the past two decades, scientists and beekeepers alike observed drastic declines in bee populations. On average, beekeepers lose significantly more honey bee colonies each year and fewer native bee species are spotted in the wild. This is especially apparent in the Midwest where research conducted at Iowa State University observes multiple factors that contribute to the decline in bees and other pollinators. According to an annual Bee Informed Partnership survey, Iowa beekeepers typically lose between 40-60% of their hives each year. Considering that Iowa has nearly 5,000 beekeepers, these levels of hive loss are staggering and it is expensive for beekeepers to purchase new honey bee queens and colonies each year. Scientists point to three major stressors that contribute synergistically to bee decline: pesticide exposure, lack of suitable habitat for nesting and foraging, and parasites and pathogens (such as the varroa mite).

### Disciplines

Agricultural Science | Agriculture

# IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

## Extension and Outreach

Integrated Crop Management

## Keeping Bees in CRP

April 21, 2020

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The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) offered through the USDA offers a promising mitigation strategy related to establishing more nesting and foraging habitat for bees. The USDA rolled out CRP over thirty years ago with the aim of conserving soil, water, and wildlife habitat by taking degraded land out of agricultural production. CRP provides 10-15 year contracts to farmers and landowners to implement conservation practices on their land, such as establishing vegetative cover, riparian buffers, and grass waterways. CRP funds are also offered specifically to establish diverse pollinator habitat through the CP42 designation. The CP42 initiative encourages the planting of forage habitat, such as wildflowers and flowering legumes, with an emphasis on native species and plants that flower throughout the growing season. CP42 acreage may be planted as a large swathe of prairie or in smaller patches adjacent to farmland, such as Prairie Strips. The Prairie STRIPS (science-based trials of rowcrops integrated with prairie strips) not only provide forage for pollinators, they also reduce erosion and soil nutrient runoff.



Increasing pollinator habitat through programs like CP42 could have tremendous impacts on bee health. Research conducted at Iowa State University found that honey bee colonies had higher mass (more pollen and nectar stores) going into winter when placed at sites near prairies as opposed to sites with predominantly agricultural landscapes. This is attributed to the higher abundance of flowering plants found at prairie sites in the fall, providing honey bees with more forage at a crucial time when bees need to increase food stores going into winter. Moreover, a greater diversity and abundance of native bee species was observed at prairie sites than at agricultural sites.

In Iowa, an impressive amount of CP42 land has been established. Approximately 42% of the total CP42 acreage across the nation is here in the Hawkeye State. In a state where 85% of the land is devoted to agricultural production, this is a boon for Iowa pollinators. However, there is more work to be done, as much of this land is not fully being utilized by beekeepers. The USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) and Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) allow and encourage the placement of honey bee apiaries on CP42 land, releasing a clarifying guidance that states:

“Ensuring the long-term viability of honey beekeeping requires the development of both suitable habitat for foraging bees, and access to this habitat for beekeepers. Farm Service Agency (FSA) and NRCS leadership encourages FSA county committees and NRCS field office staff to work together and with pollinator partners during the conservation planning process to provide healthy pollinator habitat on CRP lands, and also to encourage landowners enrolled in the CRP program to provide, as might be negotiated in the conservation planning process, access and space for beekeepers to place their hives[1].”

However, most Iowa beekeepers are not aware of this opportunity and landowners establishing CP42 may not know how to get in touch with beekeepers. There a couple of ways to increase communication between these two groups. For beekeepers interested in keeping hives on CP42 land, NRCS offices are willing to connect them with landowners enrolled in the program. If landowners would like to reach out to beekeepers, they can visit the Iowa Honey Producers Association website to find the contact information for a beekeeping club in their area.



Fully utilizing CP42 benefits landowners, beekeepers, honey bees, native bees, and other Iowa pollinators. For more information please visit the following websites:

- Iowa CRP <https://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/conservation-programs/index>
- Iowa State University Prairie Strips <https://www.nrem.iastate.edu/research/STRIPS/content/what-are-prairie-strips>
- Iowa NRCS <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/ia/home/>
- Iowa Honey Producers Association <https://www.iowahoneyproducers.org>

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[1] [https://www.fsa.usda.gov/Internet/FSA\\_File/7722287\\_honey\\_bees.pdf](https://www.fsa.usda.gov/Internet/FSA_File/7722287_honey_bees.pdf)

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