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## Safe havens for pollinators

CRP-SAFE program helps growers plant safe, nourishing habitat for pollinators.

RICHARD LEHNERT



A bumblebee finds nectar in a wildflower planting.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF USDA NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE

Fruit growers across the country will have a chance to sign up for a government program similar to what Michigan growers have used since 2008. In Michigan, it's called the CRP-SAFE Native Pollinator Program. It pays growers most of the cost of establishing and maintaining safe and nourishing habitat for pollinating insects, including native bees, domesticated honeybees, and various beetles, butterflies, and moths that also serve as pollinators. It also pays rent.

Part of the Conservation Reserve Program, SAFE is a less-than-exact acronym for State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement.

Dale Allen, conservation chief with the Michigan State Farm Service Agency, said that Michigan growers benefitted from this program, because local state "champions" went to bat, suggesting it be included as a state option under CRP. The champions included Phil Korson at the Cherry Marketing Institute, Denise Donahue at the Michigan Apple Committee, and Michigan State University small fruit entomologist Rufus Isaacs, as well as personnel within the Natural Resources Conservation Service, he said.

Since it was implemented, Michigan fruit growers have planted 1,200 acres of pollinator habitat and signed contracts for 500 acres more. A pollinator habitat planting consists of native grasses and wildflowers—with native shrubs also an option—established to provide cover, nectar, and pollen for native pollinators, Allen said. The goal when the program started in 2008 was to create, by 2013,

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2,500 acres of such habitat in the 22 counties in western Michigan. Eligible growers were in a band two counties wide all along Lake Michigan, which is Michigan's fruit production belt.

On February 1 of this year, the Farm Service Agency announced a new CRP signup between March 12 and April 6. This program will be an option nationally for the first time, and open to fruit growers anywhere.

It's costly, in both seed and soil preparation, to plant native grasses and wildflowers, but the government is paying most of the cost, plus an annual land rental fee.

Brett Blaauw, a doctoral candidate in Rufus Isaacs's entomology laboratory at Michigan State University, has been studying the effects that wildflower plantings have on beneficial insects and spoke about his work during the Northwest Michigan Orchard and Vineyard Show.

### The SAFE program

In his study in 13 plots across central and western Michigan, yellow sticky cards documented that domestic honeybees were the most-attracted pollinator, accounting for about 62 percent of the total in 2011. The rest were native bees.

Blaauw is also interested in beneficial insects other than pollinators. He found robber flies and parasitic wasps were also attracted to the plantings, and he documented an increased rate of parasitism in spotted tentiform leafminers, the only pest that was part of the study.

He found no significant increase in fruit set or fruit size, although the data trended in that direction, he said. An increase would be evidence that pollination in the orchards was enhanced by the presence of nearby habitat. There was also no increase in plant-feeding insects, meaning, he said, "the plantings did not increase the number of pest insects. They helped the beneficials, but not the pests."

The studies were done near plantings of cherries, blueberries, and apples.

To participate in the program, Allen said, growers need to sign a CRP contract and follow the rules. In Michigan, growers must plant at least two acres, but this can be broken up into quarter-acre plots. The plots must be located on working fruit farms.

Growers must plant approved seed mixes. While focusing on pollinators, the program has a dual conservation purpose. The other is to provide winter refuge and nesting cover and food for a variety of wildlife, especially grassland birds. So, the seed mixture needs to contain two pounds of pure live seed of native grasses and two pounds of native wildflowers per acre, Allen said.

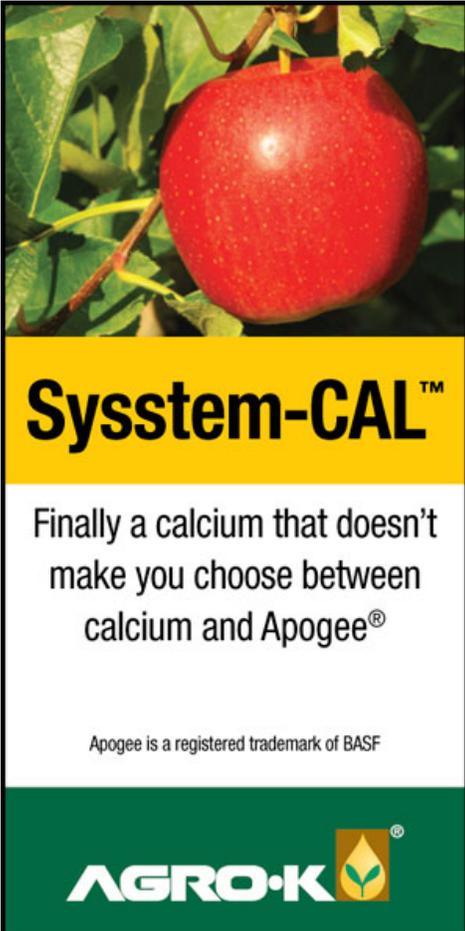
The wildflower mix must include at least 12 native species from the Michigan CRP-SAFE Eligible Wildflower List and must include these six: coreopsis, yellow coneflower, purple coneflower, wild bergamot, New England aster, and a goldenrod species. There are some 38 species of wildflowers listed for tall-grass prairie-type plantings, and 52 for short-grass plantings.

"Wildflowers should be selected to provide not only a large diversity of species, but also to provide a diversity of flower color and structure, and to ensure flowering throughout the growing season," Allen said.

Native shrub species may be planted as well. Eligible shrubs include serviceberry, grey, silky, or red Osier dogwood, highbush cranberry, nannyberry, ninebark, common elderberry and meadowsweet.

Native grasses include warm-season species—big and little bluestem and Indian grass—and cool-season grasses such as Canada wild rye and Virginia wild rye.

The area to be planted must be adequately tilled (in a manner that prevents erosion) or prepared with herbicides or burning. And in the first year, postplanting weed control by mowing is required. Every four years, fall management is required to promote the wildflowers. These CRP contracts are for 10 to 15 years.



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“Native grasses and wildflowers will live a long time after establishment, however, like most long-lived plant species, they generally establish slowly,” Allen said. “Therefore, it is important to establish these grasses properly and to have patience when evaluating results.”

## Annual rent

Growers who participate get an annual rental payment for the land of \$95 per acre, which also goes to help growers pay for ongoing management practices like mowing.

There is a \$100-per-acre signing incentive payment. In addition, there is a 50-percent cost-share to establish the planting and a further incentive payment of 40 percent to further offset out-of-pocket expenses, and cost-sharing.

“The average cost of establishing an acre of CRP-SAFE Native Pollinator Habitat is \$606 when planted into sod and \$394 when planted into crop residue,” Allen said. This is the portion for which growers receive 90 percent reimbursement.

In the national program just announced, growers will have to bid to enter the program, and these figures should be a helpful guideline.

Growers who are interested should contact their local Farm Service Agency office for details.

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