

SUPPORT FOR HIGHWAYS FOR HABITAT BILL HF498

Date: January 24, 2023

To: Minnesota House Transportation Finance & Policy Committee (email: kevin.petrie@house.mn.gov)

From: Minnesota Environmental Partnership Pollinator & Wildlife Coalition

Our Support: Our coalition is comprised of partnering organizations, farmers, biologists, naturalists, and urban and rural Minnesota residents: **We support a roadside habitat program and better stewardship of roadsides in Minnesota.**

Why develop and protect pollinator and bird habitats in the public right-of-way?

Highway right-of-ways have been recognized nationally as lands that have potential to provide habitats and migration connectivity for pollinators and birds. Historically, regenerative farming, family farming, and industrial agriculture have been important to Minnesota economy. But industrial agriculture causes habitat loss, fragmentation and degradation of land, increases pesticide use and introduces diseases that threaten the very pollinators on which we depend for food crops and a healthy environment. Nationally and in Minnesota bird and pollinator populations continue to decline rapidly.

- Nearly 3 billion bird species are lost in U.S since 1970, Cornell Lab <https://www.birds.cornell.edu/home/bring-birds-back/>
- Over half our grassland birds in Minnesota are gone, 53% (720 million) <https://www.grasslandbirdtrust.org/recent-news/3-billion-birds-lost/>
- Biodiversity is a must for all creatures from aquatics to salamanders to birds to mammals but in Minnesota, our biodiverse wetlands have been drained for corn and soybean row crops. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2214574521000572>
- In Minnesota only 1% of biodiverse prairie remains which supported most of our native bird, pollinator and animal species. <https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/prairieplan/index.html>
- Monarch Watch reported this month the overwintering numbers this year are going to be the all-time lowest numbers ever (1 hectare or 2.47 acres), monarchs and other pollinators are on their way to extinction. <https://monarchwatch.org/blog/2022/01/06/how-many-hectares-in-2021-2022/>

We are in a critical situation that needs immediate and big actions. But some of these needed actions are difficult to implement even though the public supports them. Highways for Habitat is a hugely popular program with stakeholders from rural and urban areas.

Important components and benefits of a successful HIGHWAYS FOR HABITAT program:

- Improves MnDOT state roadside management practices,
- MnDOT proactively increases native grasses and plantings along roadways,
- Establish an educational program to train operators on environmental stewardship and Integrated Roadside Vegetation Management (IRVM),
- Expand native grasses and plantings to support habitat and migration corridors for pollinators, birds and small wildlife,
- Help at-risk monarch butterfly, bumble bee and bird species recover and help avoid additional federal listings, permitting and regulation,
- Reduce mowing costs and associated operator injury,
- Reduce use of pesticides, pesticide contamination and costs,

- Provide visual appeal for tourism and creates Minnesota state pride,
- Provide erosion control and water filtration services,
- Reduce equipment fuel use and associated pollution,
- Provide pollution buffers, improves air quality and reduces carbon emissions,
- Improve highway safety by reducing visual monotony and reducing reasons for wildlife to cross the road,
- Reduce soil compaction and rejuvenates soil health,
- Provide living snow fences and wind blocks,
- Measurements to reduce pesticides, chemicals, greenhouse gases and energy consumption.

Minnesota is lagging behind other states. Some states have had rigorous programs in place for 25 or more years. These scenic roadways have become important tourism draws and a source of state pride. Roadside habitat programs also foster new partnerships between state, county and local communities, and conservation groups.

Other States Roadside Habitat Programs:

Texas DOT has an entire tourist industry centered around their 800,000 acres of roadside habitat which started with one man's vision in 1932. <https://www.txdot.gov/about/campaigns-outreach/bluebonnets-wildflowers/wildflower-program.html>

Ohio DOT saved over 2 million in the first year of their roadside program from reduced mowing. <https://news.wosu.org/wksu-stories/2019-06-10/wildflower-planting-project-is-saving-taxpayers-millions-in-mowing>

State of Ohio, Illinois and Pennsylvania found new partners to increase roadside habitat like Pheasants Forever. <https://www.pheasantsforever.org/Newsroom/2017-August/Illinois-Habitat-Highway-A-New-Partnership-for-Wil.aspx>

The State of Iowa's robust roadside habitat program was established 30 years ago. Almost all Iowa's counties participate in their program voluntarily. <https://iowadot.gov/lrtf>

Federal Highway Administration supports roadside practices for pollinators https://www.environment.fhwa.dot.gov/env_topics/ecosystems/Pollinators_Roadsides/BMPs_pollinators_landscapes.aspx

State of Florida DOT limited mowing pilot project reduced costs, reduced erosion and improved safety https://fdotwww.blob.core.windows.net/sitefinity/docs/default-source/research/reports/fdot-pr6365252-sum.pdf?sfvrsn=619c536b_2

Pennsylvania DOT Pollinator Habitat Plan <https://www.penndot.pa.gov/ProjectAndPrograms/RoadDesignEnvironment/Environment/environmental-policy/Pages/Pollinator-Habitat-Plan.aspx>

Southern California wildflower roadways: <https://www.sunset.com/travel/california/ultimate-wildflower-road-trip-california-summer>

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