

Bee a sanctuary

By C. Lacombe

This busy bee gathered pollen from a hemp crop. Credit: J. Puchinger



Farmers can play an important role in mitigating some bee decline, conserve natural insect pollinators and enhance local biodiversity. Farming Smarter is about to explore creating pollinator sanctuaries on marginal lands such as roadsides, pivot corners, low lying or saline areas. As a bonus, these sanctuaries could provide a local population to pollinate nearby crops.

The study will focus on suitable pollinator seed mixes for our southern Alberta's agro-climatic region. The pockets of mixed plants will also increase local biodiversity and promote soil

conservation. It will explore seeding rates, depth and emergence; crop establishment and a host of other agronomic variables to identify which diverse plant mixes offer the best chance of success.

The plan is to establish sanctuaries with currently available commercial plant mixes. We hope to be able to make recommendations on mixes that provide high value to wildlife. These seed mixes could also act as cover crops to promote soil conservation, soil health & soil quality.

Beekeepers manage colonies to facilitate crop and forest pollination services and produce high quality honey and bees wax. Bee populations suffer from a lack of suitable pollinator foraging plants, poor nutrition, environmental factors such as changes in land use patterns, environmental pollution, and diseases.

Recent studies show that insect pollinators, like honey bees & native (wild) bees, may be in gradual decline across the globe. Currently there are no viable, long term solutions to slow or reverse declines.

Bees, moths, butterflies, beetles and several species of flies help pollinate numerous crops such as canola, clovers, alfalfa, several forest and fruit trees as well as various species of vegetables across North America. Among all these insect pollinators, bees perform the most significant role in the natural cross pollination of a wide diversity of crops.

The hope is that we can discover easy to establish, small ecosystems that support local small wildlife - small reptiles, amphibians, birds and mammals. These areas might also create wildlife corridors for small critters that aid farmers in pest control and pollination.

It's also possible that cattle could graze these areas and, in the case of reclamation sites, improve the overall health of the area. While this project is only for one year in one place, we hope it will do well enough to warrant expanding the project to other areas of Alberta.

You can follow this project as Farming Smarter shares findings at its public events. Visit farmingsmarter.com for more information.