

March 31, 2022

Minnesota House of Representatives
Transportation Finance and Policy Committee

Testimony in Support of HF 4313

The Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation (Xerces Society) is pleased to support HF 4313.

We work with transportation agencies to identify opportunities for pollinator habitat conservation along roadways. We provide training and technical guidance to help transportation agencies implement effective pollinator conservation practices that do not compromise driver safety or roadside operations. We were contracted by the Federal Highway Administration to conduct a literature review of roadside habitat for pollinators, as well as a summary of current practices by state departments of transportation, and best management practices. **As a conservation organization working directly with transportation agencies, we are well-versed in the importance of balancing the needs of transportation agencies with conservation opportunities for pollinators.**

North America's wild pollinators are facing precipitous declines: 28% of our bumble bee species are at risk of extinction, most notably the rusty-patched bumble bee - formerly one of Minnesota's most common bumble bees and now lost from 87% of its range. Similarly, roughly 18% of North American butterflies are at risk of extinction, including the well-known monarch butterfly, which has declined in numbers by ~90% since the 1990s.

Pollinators need habitat. One of the primary factors driving pollinator decline is habitat loss. With hundreds of thousands of acres of roadsides in Minnesota, roadsides are a valuable opportunity to increase the amount of habitat available to pollinators. These acres hold the potential to create a network of habitats to support pollinators in urban and rural areas. Roadsides can provide habitat for all life stages of a diverse community of pollinators, including imperiled pollinators. Roadsides may also act as corridors for pollinators, connecting remnant habitat patches and aiding pollinators to move through landscapes or expand their ranges.

In some places, roadsides are home to intact native plant communities that are no longer found in surrounding lands. Searching for prairie remnants, for example, can mean scouring roadsides and railroad rights of way. In heavily altered landscapes, even those roadsides without intact native plant communities can be the only semi-natural habitat present. For some listed or imperiled species of pollinators, roadsides include some of the last remaining patches of their habitat. Once widespread species that are struggling, such as the monarch butterfly or the rusty patched bumble bee, are not completely reliant on roadsides habitat but roadsides are an important component of their survival.

The Highways for Habitat program will help make roadsides more pollinator friendly by providing the resources and training to restore and manage roadsides for these important animals.

Creating and managing pollinator habitat along roadsides can benefit transportation agencies and provides ecological benefits beyond pollinators. Mowing the many acres of right-of-way every year represents a substantial expenditure, and maintaining habitat by reducing routine mowing (beyond the safety/clear zone adjacent to the pavement that is regularly maintained for driver safety) can reduce costs for transportation agencies. Creating pollinator habitat along roadsides has many additional benefits beyond pollinator conservation. These include carbon sequestration, improved air quality, reduction of invasive species, pest control by wild beneficial insects, runoff reduction, and aesthetics. A report from the University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, for example, estimated the value of ecosystem services and functions provided by Florida's roadsides (pollination included) at over \$500 million annually, *but that value could be doubled if wildflower areas were designated and sustainable maintenance practices such as reduced mowing were widely adopted.* Practices associated with pollinator conservation can also showcase regional natural heritage. A survey conducted by Minnesota Department of Transportation found that drivers perceived flowery prairie vegetation, as well as mixed species woodlands, on roadsides as very attractive, safe, and well maintained in both urban and rural settings, and was preferred over a completely mown turf roadside.

Pollinators are critical to our food supply as well as to the health of ecosystems. Enhancing management of roadsides in Minnesota through integrated roadside vegetation management will better support our important pollinators.

HF 4313 is a step forward to increase the potential conservation value of roadsides to pollinators and communities across Minnesota. The Xerces Society is pleased to support the bill.

Thank you,

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Background on the Xerces Society

The Xerces Society is an international nonprofit organization that protects wildlife through the conservation of invertebrates and their habitat. We have offices throughout the United States, including in Minnesota. The Xerces Society is a global leader in pollinator conservation, and has the largest pollinator conservation team worldwide. The Society's work is based on the latest science and is increasingly recognized as the standard for pollinator conservation by organizations such as the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, the White House, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service, members of the U.S. Congress, the organic and natural foods industry, and the sustainable agriculture community, including farmers and farm organizations from across the United States and abroad. Our work has led to 1.25 million acres of pollinator habitat restored on farms over the last decade. Through our Bee City USA initiative, more than 200 city and campus communities are improving habitat for pollinators and spreading awareness about these essential animals. We have also conducted hundreds of workshops and short courses on native pollinators; over 21,000 people have learned how to conserve invertebrates through our outreach and education programs.