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Testimony before Natural Resources Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife and Oceans

Hearing on "The Birds and the Bees: How Pollinators Help Maintain Healthy Ecosystems"

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I'd like to first thank Chairwoman Bordallo, and the Natural Resources Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife and Oceans, for holding this important hearing. The work of a few different groups has also been crucial in our understanding of this issue. I would like to recognize the steadfast efforts of the Coevolution Institute and their North American Pollinator Protection Campaign, which has been instrumental in bringing this to the attention of Congress and has worked in a productive manner with federal agencies, non-profits and international partners. Additionally, I would like to highlight the Xerces Society, located in my hometown of Portland, Oregon, for their dedication in educating all of us about this topic.

Pollinators are integral to the very survival of an astounding number and variety of plant life that sustains us. The numbers tell the story – nearly 75% of the world's flowering plants, more than two-thirds of the world's crop species, and one out of every three mouthfuls of food have a direct connection to pollinators.

Pollinators also play a significant role in the production of over 150 food crops in the United States. These crops include apples, alfalfa, almonds, blueberries, and cranberries. Almost all the fruit and grain crops require pollination to produce. But today we have a problem.

Many species of wild pollinators are in decline.

Disruptions of localized pollinating systems, and declines of certain species of pollinators, have been reported on every continent except Antarctica. This presents a series of complications which must be addressed.

Many do not realize that agricultural production is heavily dependent on pollinators. In the US, for example, it is almost exclusively dependent on wild native bees. There is a direct correlation between the presence of a diverse population of pollinators in an area

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and the health of a diverse population of plant species. Fruits and seeds derived from insect pollination are a major diet of hundreds of bird species and numerous mammals, ranging from deer mice to grizzly bears.

Financially, the decline of pollinators presents a whole series of concerns. Insects and other invertebrate pollinators provide services worth over $57 billion to Americans. Our eco-tourism industry, responsible for a $50 billion impact on our economy, depends on wildlife that needs insects for food. The pest control industry is a more than $4.5 billion sector of our economy, and pollinators contribute to $3 billion in crops. Pollinators also provide direct environmental benefits to ranchers, saving more than $380 million annually by cleaning grazing lands.

Sadly, populations of a variety of pollinator species have been declining in recent years, due to a loss of habitat, improper use of pesticides and herbicides, and replacement of native plant species with non-native or engineered plants. The introduction of non-native, invasive species, either by accident or through farming practices, has also significantly contributed to this problem.

Since 1945, the number of managed honey bee colonies in the US has decreased by half, due to recently introduced diseases and pesticide poisonings, as well as the invasion by Africanized honey bees. Native bees are also crucial to the health of our ecosystems, as they are more versatile than honey bees. Some species, for example, such as mason bees, are active when conditions are too cold or wet for honey bees. Bumble bees and several other native species can buzz pollinate flowers – vibrating the flower to release pollen from deep inside – which honey bees cannot do.

It is apparent that we put our agricultural production – and food supply – at risk when we rely on a single species, such as the honey bee, for pollination. As far as scientists can tell, this is a global problem – and they are still assessing the effects of global warming on pollinator populations.

We can take steps to address this problem by recognizing the contributions that pollinators make to our agricultural production and our food supply and taking steps to protect and conserve them.

A number of related bills are working their way through Congress, and I would like to highlight a few of them this afternoon. I have signed on as a cosponsor to the Pollinator Protection Act (H.R. 1709), introduced by Representative Hastings which addresses Colony Collapse Disorder in honey bees.

Thirty of our friends in the Senate, led by Senator Max Baucus, have sponsored the Pollinator Habitat Protection Act of 2007. Senate Bill 1496 improves habitat and food sources for pollinators by including pollinator habitat in existing conservation programs. This is a simply, easy, and effective proposal - there is no new program or new costs, just additional encouragement for farmers to protect important pollinator habitat.

I will be introducing a bill in the House similar to Senator Baucus's legislation to help protect pollinator habitat.

The Pollinator Protection Act, S. 1694, introduced by Senator Boxer, directly applies research funding to strengthen native bee, as well as honey bee, populations. The legislation would specifically create incentives for farmers to protect, restore and enhance pollinator habitat on and around farms. Most importantly, the Act would encourage state-level Natural Resources Conservation Services and Farm Service Agency offices to promote scientifically tested and approved pollinator-friendly practices for farmers participating in the Farm Bill conservation programs.

Pollinators touch everyone's lives, enabling the production of food, beverages, medicines, fibers, and enriching and aerating the soil. We need to acknowledge and protect these important and irreplaceable ecosystem services.

The conservation of pollinators can engage Americans from all walks life and all interests in a common cause. Garden Club members, farmers, environmentalists, urban gardeners, conservationists, and land managers all care deeply about this issue. Pollinator protection is a positive issue; rather than being another "too little, too late" crisis, people can take positive steps to understand and document pollinator populations, keep them healthy, and improve the viability of our food supply and our environment.

Thank you for allowing me to testify in front of this committee this afternoon, and I would also like to thank my colleague, Representative Hastings, for his leadership on this issue that is so important to the health and security of our food, our land, and our country.