

Finding Opportunities for Habitat in Rights-of-Way

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In 2015 the White House released the National Strategy to Promote the Health of Honey Bees and Other Pollinators, which noted that beekeepers reported losing 40 percent of their honey bee colonies in 2014, monarch butterfly populations have declined by as much as 90 percent over the last two decades, and other severe declines have been observed in native bee populations. With increasing attention being given to these startling figures, a number of collaborative efforts have emerged to foster conservation activities in key sectors and support an all-hands-on-deck approach to habitat restoration. Working with industries in the utility and transportation sectors, the Energy Resources Center (ERC) at the University of Illinois-Chicago identified a large opportunity for and interest in restoring pollinator habitat along rights-of-way. The ERC began forming a public-private collaborative focused specifically on pollinator habitat in rights-of-way in March 2015. Since then more than 150 organizations have engaged in the Rights-of-Way as Habitat Working Group, including several railroads. That includes Union Pacific who also serves on the working group steering committee.

The working group's mission is to engage diverse stakeholders in a collaborative environment that promotes pollinator habitats and healthy ecosystems along rights-of way by providing expertise, cost-effective best management practices, and industry-driven tools and resources. Activities of the working group include facilitating workshops and webinars, assembling an online resources database, developing a unified message about rights-of-way as habitat, encouraging collaboration between landowners, and providing industry recognition. This presentation will provide an overview of the Rights-of-Way as Habitat Working Group efforts as well as highlight some specific actions of working group participants, including programs at Union Pacific, American Electric Power, and Illinois Tollway.