**Op-Ed: Conservation Efforts Provide a Win-Win for Natural Resources and Pollinators**

*By Jerry Raynor, Indiana NRCS State Conservationist*

It’s finally summer and the sounds of nature are in full force. Waking up to birds chirping and listening to butterflies fluttering and bees buzzing while enjoying the patio is something we’ve all been looking forward to since winter. But these animals are bringing more than just music to our ears – they’re also bringing food.

It’s estimated that about three-fourths of the world’s flowering plants and about 35 percent of the world’s food crops depend on pollinators to reproduce. Some scientists estimate that one out of every three bites of food we eat exists because of pollinators like bees, butterflies and moths, birds and bats, and beetles and other insects.

Unfortunately, pollinators are faced with many challenges in today’s modern world and we have seen a significant decline in these crucial species over the past several years. Habitat loss, disease, parasites, and environmental contaminants have all contributed to the decline of many species of pollinators.

One species in particular, the Monarch butterfly, has declined significantly over the past two decades, in part because of the decrease in native plants, including milkweed, on which their caterpillars feed. The orange-and-black butterfly is known for its annual, multi-generational migration from Mexico to as far north as Canada. Because monarch butterflies are always on the move, they need to have the right plants at the right time along their migration route. Monarch butterflies depend on milkweed to lay their eggs during the journey. Caterpillars need to feed on milkweed to complete their life cycle, and adult butterflies need the right nectar producing plants in bloom for needed energy.

USDA’s Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) is just one of many agencies encouraging change by investing dollars in a 10-state targeted conservation effort to give owners and managers of private lands the tools they need to create and enhance habitat for monarch butterflies. With assistance from NRCS, producers and conservation partners can increase critical populations of milkweed and nectar-rich plants by establishing them along field borders, in buffers along waterways or around wetlands, in pastures and other suitable locations. And we know when landowners improve habitat for monarchs, they are also providing food and habitat for other essential pollinators, reducing erosion, increasing soil health, and inhibiting the expansion of invasive species.

June 22-28 is National Pollinator week. As we celebrate pollinators throughout this week, I want to thank Indiana’s farm families for all you do to care for the land, improve the environment, and provide us safe and affordable food and fiber. I look forward to continuing to work together to provide better habitat for our pollinator friends.

You are invited to learn more about the Natural Resources Conservation Service, conservation practices and pollinators. Stop by and talk with your District Conservationist or visit our website [www.in.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.in.nrcs.usda.gov). To locate the office nearest you, visit: <https://offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator/app>.

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Word Count: 469