

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 14, 2016

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

The Honorable Gina McCarthy
Administrator
Environmental Protection Agency
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20460

Dear Secretary Vilsack and Administrator McCarthy:

We write today to request that you take additional actions to protect our nation's pollinators based on recommendations from the Government Accountability Office's recent Bee Health Report. We appreciate the efforts each of you has taken to date as part of the National Pollinator Health Task Force. However, more must be done to protect commercial and wild bee populations, which are an irreplaceable national resource.

Pollinators are critical to the nation's agriculture sector and environment. According to the Pollinator Health Task Force, pollinators contribute more than \$24 billion to the U.S. economy, of which honeybees directly contribute \$15 billion as they pollinate more than 90 commercially grown crops in North America. This figure does not capture the incalculable value native bees provide to the environment by pollinating nearly 80 percent of all flowering plants.

Despite their irreplaceable contribution to the health of agriculture and the environment, domestic and wild bees are under serious threat. From 2006 to 2014, beekeepers reported honeybee colony losses averaging 29 percent annually, an unsustainable rate of loss well above normal levels. The U.S. Department of Agriculture reports that bee populations face increasing risks from parasites, disease, lack of adequate nutrition, and sub-lethal pesticide exposure.

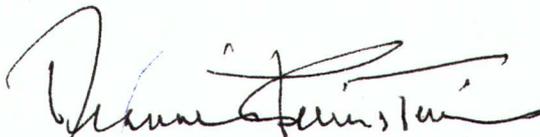
We therefore ask that your agencies collaborate to achieve the following actions, in order to provide a greater level of protection for our nation's commercial and wild bees:

- Improve data collection on honeybee health and the health of other pollinators. The federal government needs additional data so that agencies can identify and address threats to pollinator health. This includes any data necessary to study the potential impact of pesticides on pollinator health. We strongly believe that agencies should develop the data collection methods necessary to evaluate the efficacy of actions intended to improve pollinator health.

- Develop a long-term plan to ensure that the work of the Pollinator Health Task Force continues beyond the current Administration. Protecting honeybees and other pollinators is a critical function, and the federal government must continue building upon the progress underway since the task force was created in 2014.
- Identify threats to pollinators from “unregistered mixtures of pesticides” commonly used in commercial and consumer applications. Currently, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) does not track unregistered pesticide mixtures commonly used by commercial applicators or any potential threats arising from their use. Simple surveys required during the registration or renewal process for EPA-registered pesticide applicators could be one way to provide such information.
- Reduce unnecessary pesticide use through measures that include updating labeling requirements for pesticides demonstrated to affect the nervous systems of bees. Labels should more clearly indicate the specific application for which a pesticide was approved by the EPA at the time of registration and warn more clearly against unapproved and ineffective applications that harm pollinators, other animals, and human health.
- Build upon the existing “Pollinator Protection Boxes” on labels, also referred to as “bee advisory boxes,” in order to increase consumer and user awareness of the proper, effective application for pesticides and best practices for their use, for both commercial and homeowner pesticide users.

Thank you for your commitment to pollinator health. We look forward to your rapid action to respond to this crisis and to continuing our collaboration to protect our nation’s native and commercial bee populations.

Sincerely,



Dianne Feinstein
United States Senator



Barbara Boxer
United States Senator



Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator

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