

A PLAN FOR POLLINATORS



LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS ARE CRUCIAL TO NEW FEDERAL STRATEGIES.

BY JEFF LINK

On May 19, 2015, a pollinator health task force appointed by the White House (see “Pollinators in Chief,” *Now, LAM*, December 2014) released a report outlining a robust federal plan to reverse the population declines among pollinator species through research and land management actions that knit together fragmented habitats and improve pollinator health.

The report, *National Strategy to Promote the Health of Honey Bees and Other Pollinators*, outlines specific goals to reduce mortality among honeybees during the winter season, increase the eastern population of the monarch butterfly that overwinters in Mexico, and restore or enhance seven million acres of land as habitat for pollinators over the next five years.

Just how severe is the threat to pollinators? According to the report, in the past several years, managed honeybee colonies

have seen annual losses of 42.1 percent, and there has been a 90 percent decline in the monarch butterfly population, posing a threat to crop production but also to natural plant communities that provide ecosystem benefits such as carbon cycling and flood and erosion control.

For many landscape architects, this is not news. Recently, however, the decline of pollinators has become a focal point of the Obama administration, given its implications for the economy and the U.S. food supply. “Pollinators, most often honeybees, are also responsible for one in every three bites of food we take, and increase our nation’s crop values each year by more than \$15 billion,” the report points out.

ABOVE
At this federal courthouse in Albuquerque, flowering plants create food and habitat for pollinators.



ABOVE
In Florida, constructed wetlands at the Miramar FBI building are prime pollinator breeding grounds.

“The two critical issues are the ability of pollinators—bees, birds, bats, butterflies—to find habitat worthy of nesting when this land is being lost, and their ability to forage, to have food stores that are available and dispersed,” says Christian Gabriel, ASLA, the national design director for landscape architecture at the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA). “The largest planted environment being grown in the last 20 years, turfgrass, might as well be a parking field or a sand desert; it provides no ability for pollinators to eat.”

The strategy’s focus on the potential of the federal government—the largest land manager in the country—to build a mosaic of vegetative landscapes across urban and exurban areas to restore pollinator populations to healthy levels is likely to open new doors for landscape architects, says Mark Cason, ASLA’s government affairs manager.

On the tactical level, that translates not only to new training opportunities for federal design and construction staff but also to potential contract opportunities for landscape architects at GSA-managed facilities, highway rights-of-way managed by state departments of transportation (which span 17 million acres), and vast wildlife areas. “This national strategy is a big step in the right direction,” Cason says. “I can only imagine if every piece of this document is implemented, how enormous the impact on pollinator health and vitality will be.”

When looking for what shape future projects may take, Gabriel says, designers might look to the SITES-certified landscape at

the Federal Bureau of Investigation field office in Miramar, Florida, designed by Curtis + Rogers Design Studio, which features wetlands habitat ripe for pollinator nesting. Or to the Mariposa Land Port of Entry near Tucson, Arizona, which ARC Studios planted with winter flowering succulents appealing to nocturnal bats.

At the Pete V. Domenici U.S. Courthouse in Albuquerque, New Mexico, designed by Rios Clementi Hale Studios, the landscape is 79 percent native plants and converts an urban building sitting “on nine acres of consumptive turfgrass and an underperforming, anachronistic underground parking garage into a visually evocative, high-performance environment,” Gabriel says. Together, these projects serve as “stepping-stones,” upon which pollinators can find food and refuge.

With proposed support of more than \$82 million of pollinator-specific 2016 budget allocations for the U.S. Department of the Interior, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Department of Agriculture—nearly \$34 million above the enacted fiscal year 2015 budget—this national strategy represents the ways in which policy can influence design, and vice versa.

“We’re moving to a broader menagerie of plant material, away from a focus on a singularity of species to plants that flower at different times of the year and landscapes that operate at multiple levels—trees, understory, ground cover,” Gabriel says. “We’re looking at a range of plant material—mesic to more hydric, depending on the local ecology. This is where landscape architects will have a huge impact: how these pieces fit together and where.” ●

Landscape architects can learn more about contracting with the GSA by visiting www.asla.org/small-business.aspx, or search federal RFPs at fbo.gov.