

ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGE(S)



The plight of the pollinators, worker protection and immigration reform are just some of the hot topics facing our industry in Washington, D.C.

BY CRAIG REGELBRUGGE

Monarchs, and *Apis* and ground bees, oh my! The plight of pollinators has thrust pollinator health into the center of AmericanHort's government relations agenda. And that isn't likely to change anytime soon. We'll touch on other issues later, but first, let's "Grow Wise, Bee Smart." Last July, AmericanHort's research foundation, the Horticultural Research Institute, launched the Horticultural Industry Bee and Pollinator Stewardship Initiative in collaboration with AmericanHort, the Society of American Florists (SAF) and the American Floral Endowment.

The catalyst was the fast-emerging threat that professional plant growers might lose neonicotinoid insecticides from the toolkit of pest management options. That would be hugely challenging, since the "neonics" are by and large among the safest options for workers and the environment. They are generally benign to beneficial insects, and a cornerstone of integrated pest and resistance management programs.

THREE GOALS

Initiative has three main goals. First, fund research to provide key answers where we now have gaps.

Second, establish a "best practices" framework for growers to protect pollinators while managing pests.

And third, seek to partner with groups that share common interest in expanding pollinator habitat and forage. The goals, and the specific strategies to pursue them, were shaped by an industry task force of highly respected growers and scientists.

We've made huge strides. With generous support from leading greenhouse and nursery growers, the Horticultural Research Institute has funded four research projects that rose to the top of a rigorous review process.

The framework of a stewardship program has been created and we're working out the implementation details. Exciting partnerships are taking shape to expand pollinator forage and habitat. For more information, visit the Grow Wise, Bee Smart initiative website: www.growwise.org.

POLLINATOR NATIONAL STRATEGY

On May 18, the long-awaited federal strategy on pollinator protection was announced. It is lengthy and detailed (64 pages, plus another 80 pages of appendices covering the activities that will be undertaken by each agency).

Thankfully, it is mostly balanced and sensible. Primary goals include reducing honey bee colony losses, increasing monarch butterfly populations and restoring

or enhancing millions of acres of land as pollinator habitats through public and private action. AmericanHort coordinated a joint industry statement, and we are eyes-wide-open with respect to opportunities and risks.

The biggest opportunity for industry comes with new interest in planting plants of all types that provide pollen and nectar. AmericanHort is a founding member of a diverse network of organizations coming together to encourage habitat restoration and the planting of pollinator gardens of all sizes.

The biggest threat, on the other hand, would be the loss of key tools important in plant production. This is a bigger question than just the fate of the neonicotinoid insecticides.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) will require reams of new data on pesticide impacts to bees and pollinators, for literally dozens of pesticide active ingredients. Still, EPA has committed to follow the science.

Finally, the strategy calls for significant investments in research, including those by USDA agencies. There is no doubt we need better information to guide decisions on when and how we should be using pesticides, and when their use should be avoided.

NEW WORKER PROTECTION STANDARD

While on the subject of pesticides and the EPA, by the time you are reading this, we'll likely have a new Worker Protection Standard rule specifying expanded training, recordkeeping, posting and other requirements for all agricultural operations that apply pesticides. EPA proposed a new rule last year. AmericanHort and SAF submitted joint comments detailing our concern with the proposal. It could present major new costs and burdens for the industry.

THE WORKFORCE AND IMMIGRATION REFORM

Republicans have a perfect opportunity to tackle at least some of the more urgent reforms needed to repair our immigration system. They control both chambers of Congress, and strategists are sounding the alarm that the GOP will not be successful at retaking the White House (and, increasingly, statewide races in a growing number of places) without significantly broader support from Latino and Hispanic voters. Yet, they have been stymied by a group of hardliners who keep moving the goal posts.

GOP hardliners have for some years insisted on "border security first." Yet, the broadly supported goal of border security has been largely achieved. Our southern border, at least, is more secure than it's been in years, after billions spent over many years on manpower and technology (with varying degrees of return on investment).

Whether it's that investment, or changing economic and demographic conditions in Mexico, unauthorized border crossings have plummeted. One result, of

course, is growing labor shortages in sectors like agriculture. (The largest user of farm labor, California, would be in the midst of a devastating labor drought were it not for the meteorological one.) Pressure is building for real solutions.

Lately, the hardliners have argued that immigration enforcement of all types — border, interior, making the E-Verify program mandatory for all U.S. employers — must pass first. Or be implemented first. Or be demonstrated successful first. The version of a border security bill being considered in the House defines success as 100 percent effectiveness. When in the business of law enforcement does that happen?

Yet, hope springs eternal, and sometimes small successes matter. Such was the case when 61 House members — including 55 Republicans — joined on to a letter to Speaker John Boehner rejecting the hardliners' all-enforcement-first approach and calling for a workable solution for agriculture as part of any effort to make E-Verify mandatory.

We have also seen sprigs of new growth of bipartisanship on the issue of granting President Obama fast-track authority to negotiate a couple big trade

agreements. The politics of international trade bear a lot of resemblance to the politics of immigration.

Then there are the swirling dynamics of a very complicated 2016 presidential contest. Hillary Clinton too generously promised that she would go even further than President Obama did when he announced various executive actions on immigration, even though those actions are tied up in protracted litigation. Still, a former New Hampshire GOP leader described Mrs. Clinton's actions as "cutting off our arms and beating us with the bloody ends." Indeed, failure to mount a credible effort on immigration will hurt Republicans electorally, which is in part why we might see some kind of cooler-heads breakthrough in the months ahead.

Meanwhile, we are engaged in the advocacy equivalent of trench warfare trying to sustain and improve the limited but important H-2A and H-2B seasonal visa programs. Both are the continued targets of bureaucratic hostility, but things are particularly rough with H-2B. There, employers face twin challenges of very hostile new program rules, plus a cap on visas that has already shut many out.

Why is this important to growers? The landscape industry is the largest user of the H-2B program, to fill seasonal or peak need jobs. The impact of labor shortages will ultimately affect all of us.

FARM CREDIT SYSTEM TARGETED?

As they say, if it's not one thing, it's another. Recently, the head of the powerful American Bankers Association called for elimination of the farm credit system. Recognizing the importance of the system to many of our growers, AmericanHort joined with like-minded organizations to push back. We'll be monitoring this issue in the days ahead.

Each of these challenges can be met successfully. Indeed, there is opportunity in most of them. Meeting both is why our industry associations were first formed, and why they are critical today. Thank you for your active support. ■

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