

February 17, 2020

Testimony in support of House Bill 2623: Establishing requirements for claiming pollinator-friendly solar sites

Submitted by: Sara Baer, Director of the Kansas Biological Survey and State Biologist, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66047

Dear House Agriculture Committee,

House Bill No. 2623, "Kansas solar pollinator habitat act," mandates the Kansas Biological Survey (state biological survey in the legislation) to develop, and maintain a public record of, pollinator-friendly solar site scorecards. The bill proposes solar operators can claim that the site benefits pollinators if the vegetation and management plan meet a checklist of criteria developed by the Kansas Biological Survey. The bill also proposes that site owner-completed scorecards and vegetation management plans be registered with the Kansas Biological Survey and made publicly available.

Pollinators are organisms that transfer pollen from one plant to another during the act of foraging for nutrients from flowers. Pollination facilitates seed production and promotes genetic diversity in plant populations, a widely acclaimed service that natural ecosystems provide to society. Pollinators are declining in abundance, globally, and several states have passed similar legislation to mitigate this decline. Pollinator populations are needed to sustain agricultural production and biodiversity of natural plant and wildlife populations. Establishing pollinator habitat involves planting and maintaining native wildflowers. In addition to providing floral resources to pollinators, native perennial wildflowers reduce soil erosion, increase water infiltration, improve soil health, provide high quality food resources, and enhance habitat for other wildlife. Increasing demand for native wildflower seed also has the potential to offer new production options for Kansas growers. In conjunction with generating cleaner energy, the Kansas solar pollinator habitat act is a win-win sustainable solution toward meeting needs of society in a way that benefits the environment.

The Kansas Biological Survey, established in 1911 and operated by the University of Kansas, is a designated research center dedicated to pursuing a deeper understanding of and appreciation for our biological resources through world-class research, education, and service. As such, the Kansas Biological Survey is the appropriate entity to develop pollinator-friendly scorecards. In other states where similar legislation has passed, pollinator-friendly habitat scorecards have been developed through inter-agency pollinator-friendly initiatives. Scorecards contain checklists of the percent cover of flowering species, number of flowering species planted, number of flowering species observed, number of seasons with a particular number of flowering species, type of management practices used at the site, seed sources of species used, pesticide risk, and area of vegetation buffer.

Expenditures will be required from the State General Fund in FY2021 for the Kansas Biological Survey to begin an inter-agency, pollinator-friendly solar initiative to provide input on pollinator-friendly vegetation criteria and recommendations for management plans to establish and maintain pollinator habitat amidst solar panels by January 2021. Developing recommendations will be especially challenging for Kansas because there are at least six major ecoregions spanning a strong west-east climate gradient. A half-time position at the Kansas Biological Survey will be needed to develop the scorecards of recommended vegetation criteria and management plans by January 2021, respond to solar site owner questions about constructing and maintaining pollinator habitat throughout the duration of the program, register scorecards in an online database, and make scorecards publicly accessible through FY2021 and thereafter.

In summary, the Kansas Biological Survey is supportive of establishing pollinator habitat on solar operated sites, **but the Kansas Biological Survey does not have the budgetary resources to fulfill this mandate** without an increase in expenditures from the State General Fund in FY2021, and into perpetuity.

Respectfully submitted,

Sara G. Baer