



# POLLINATOR HABITATS IN UTILITY RIGHTS OF WAY

*By Brian Zeidner*

In 1681, Charles II of England granted the Providence of Pennsylvania to William Penn. The pioneers who settled on the Pennsylvania frontier were content with clean water, something to eat, a dry place to sleep, and opportunities for a livelihood. Life today is much easier. We enjoy living in a technologically advanced country with modern conveniences – and those conveniences all require electricity.

As necessary as electricity is these days, we often view electric utility rights of way as a nuisance or a challenge. Landowners – especially forest landowners – would rather fully utilize their property with their preferred plantings and uses. The electric utility, however, is required to manage the vegetation around power lines. There can be consensus.

An electric utility has an easement for properties where it has poles and wires. Utility easements are required from property owners prior to a utility beginning powerline construction and offering electrical service to customers or members. You may wonder if an easement is still binding if you are not the one who signed it, or if it was not recorded in the county courthouse. Such an easement is both legitimate and binding.

Generally, electric utilities hold easements granting them permission to install and maintain poles and powerlines in rights of way on land owned by others. Though easements can vary from one electric provider to another, they typically include language that permits the utility to access and maintain their powerlines. This

includes tree trimming, brush cutting, powerline construction and ongoing maintenance activities. Right-of-way maintenance assures the safe and reliable delivery of electricity to us – the customer or member.

The electric cooperative I work for maintains a 40-foot right-of-way (20 feet on each side of the line) for most of its high-voltage powerlines. A maintenance schedule is followed to spray, mow and cut our rights of way.

In the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many people were excited about an easier life with electricity and were willing to provide whatever access the utility asked for. Today, there can be conflict. As I have studied this landowner/utility dynamic, I've recognized an opportunity to develop a win-win solution.

I am excited to share that my electric cooperative is developing a pollinator habitat evaluation program to help us determine if we can manage our rights of way with a new approach. Enhanced service reliability, reduced costs, and minimizing our environmental impacts – while creating new habitats for pollinators – holds broad appeal for many involved in the maintenance of our 2,700 right-of-way miles. As we have considered this initiative, we feel there are many mutual benefits.

## **Member Relationships**

Landowners, forestry and wildlife resource professionals, apiary managers, naturalists, conservationists, and municipal managers have recognized the value of establishing and providing natural habitats for many years,

especially pollinator habitats. With minimal maintenance, plant species for pollinators can be established without growing into powerlines and landowners can enjoy watching pollinators at work.

## **Costs**

Traditional electric right-of-way management programs include tree trimming, tree removal, and brush cutting. More recently, strategic spraying has been utilized for vegetation control. Mechanical cutting costs are high and always increasing.

Costs to establish pollinator habitat would include spraying, no-till planter rental, seed mix purchase, and employee or contractor time. Costs to maintain pollinator habitat would include occasional maintenance mowing, as well as spot treatment of tree seedlings and invasive species. Reduced maintenance costs mean lower rates, another landowner benefit.

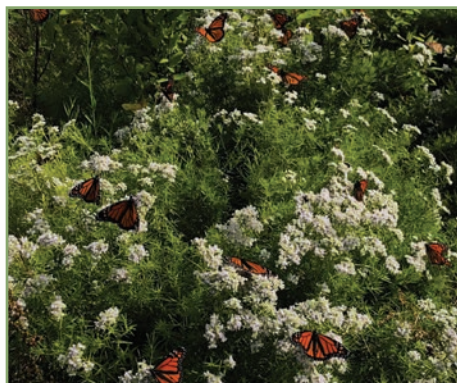
## **Environmental Considerations**

Re-establishing native species helps control invasive plants and pests and creates greater biodiversity in the environment. Birds, along with bees, butterflies, and other beneficial insects, thrive in areas that are designed, constructed, and maintained to support them. The decline of the honeybee population in our region has concerned beekeepers for years and increasing pollinator habitat is a proven practice to help with the recovery of bee populations. Many insects are critical to the pollination of fruits and vegetables and ultimately contribute to the nation's food supply.

# Presenting: POLLINATORS



This electricity transmission R-O-W is well-established with beneficial native grasses, such as deertongue (*Panicum clandestinum*), and forbs including various goldenrods (*Solidago* spp) and Joe Pye weed (*Eupatorium fistulosum*).



All photos credit: Mark Fiely, Ernst Conservation Seeds.

Utility rights of way are increasingly understood to provide habitat for declining species of songbirds. Combining early successional, low shrub habitat with pollinator plantings provides both food and cover for some of these species.

Soils naturally improve with organic matter from meadow plant decomposition by holding moisture and carbon. Creating pollinator habitats produces similar positive results for soil health.

Rich, undisturbed soils that are full of biodiversity and have plants with established root structures act as a filter for streams, rivers, and aquifers, so clean water is another byproduct of good soils.

Pollinator habitat contributes to improved water quality compared to soil-disturbing activities done with heavy, traditional right-of-way maintenance equipment. Electric utilities and landowners agree – a healthy and improving environment benefits us all.

### Planning

Establishing a new pollinator habitat program requires many considerations, including evaluation of soils and site orientation, mowing and spraying to eliminate undesirable growth, seed purchase, no-till drill rental, labor, and education.

Our program is starting with pollinator habitat transitions on cooperative-owned property, will expand to member

pilot projects and then to larger right-of-way plantings. There will be an opportunity for review and evaluation at each phase of the project.

Projected partners include our local conservation districts, Ernst Conservation Seeds, local ag equipment dealers, professional consultants, and cooperative staff. We also hope to develop on-site field trip opportunities for local students and educators.

Like the Pennsylvania pioneers, we all want clean water, safe food, appropriate shelter, and opportunity. Today, electricity is required to accommodate these desires. Landowners and utilities can work together for the betterment of all.

Brian Zeidner and his wife Pat own and operate a 42-acre beef farm in Bradford County. Brian also works as the Member Service Director for Claverack Rural Electric Cooperative, serves as a Bradford County Conservation District Director, is a Pennsylvania Forest Steward and a United States Air Force veteran.