

The Future Of Our Food Depends On Honeybees, And The USDA Is Spending Millions To Save Them

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In case you haven't heard, honeybees aren't doing so great. But the U.S. Department of Agriculture thinks it's found a way to make life a little easier for these imperiled pollinators.

This week, the USDA [announced](#) that it would be setting aside \$4 million for farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners who want to plant more pollinator-friendly flora — including wildflowers, native grasses, and cover crops like clover, sunflowers, mustard, and buckwheat — on their lands. The USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is working with farmers in six Midwestern states — Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, South

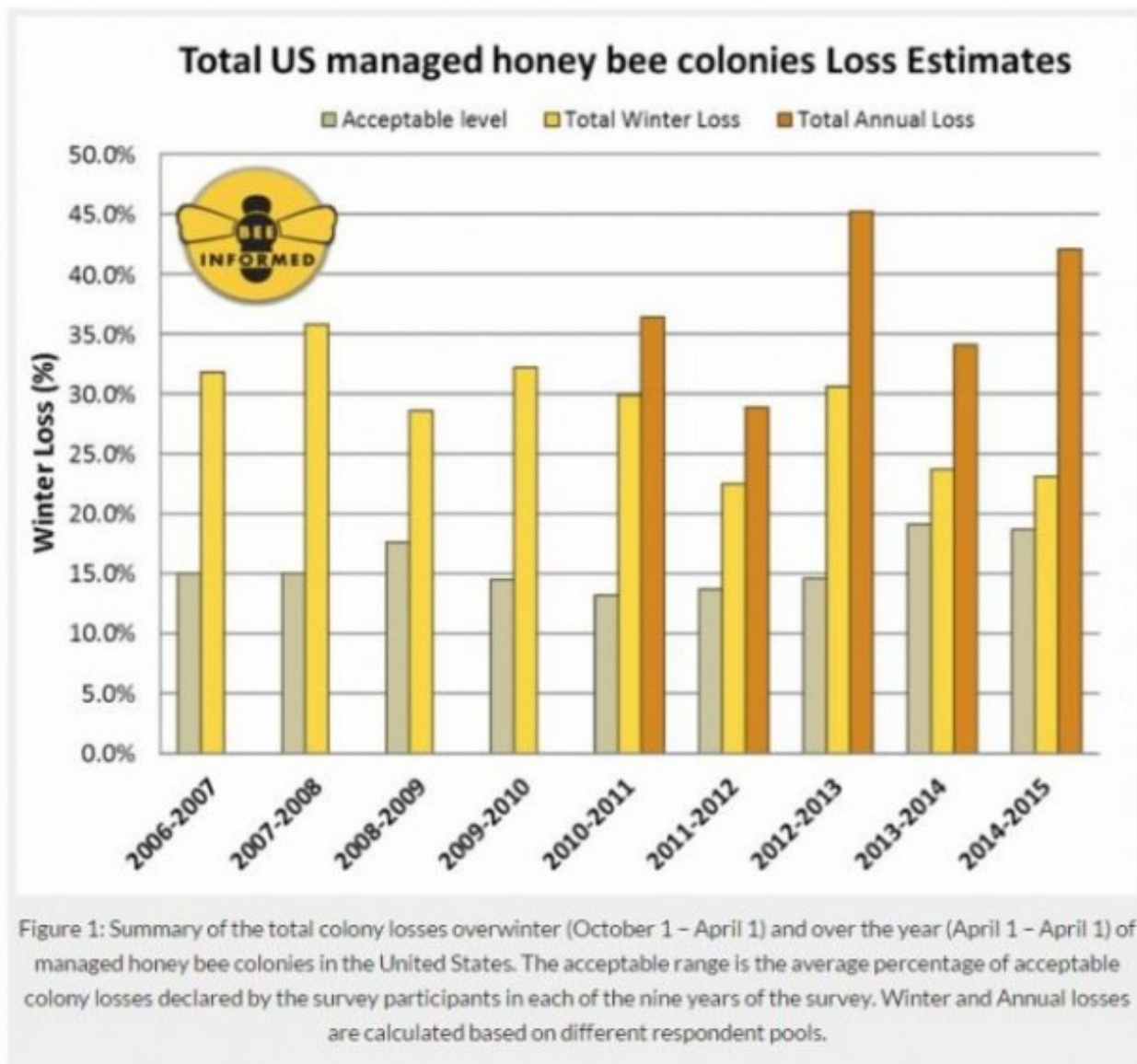
Dakota, and Wisconsin — to help make these bee-friendly changes.

“The future of our food supply depends on honeybees,” NRCS Chief Jason Weller said in a statement. “This effort partners with farmers, ranchers and forest landowners to ensure honeybees have safe and diverse food sources during a time when they need it most.”

The foraging opportunities for honeybees — and native pollinators like butterflies, bumblebees, and other wild bees — are greatly enhanced when they can access vast fields of wildflowers and other native plants. But these fields are being broken up by agriculture and covered up by development, so the USDA hopes that setting aside this money will help bring back foraging space for pollinators.

The USDA has been working on this initiative for the past two years, and the agency says that so far, it’s helped increase honeybee food on 35,000 acres. Last year, the agency [invested \\$3 million](#) into the program, which targets Midwestern states because most of the country’s beekeepers bring their bees there during the summer, turning the region into a “resting ground” for the bees, a place where they can gather pollen for the winter months. Investing in pollinator health results in other benefits for farmers, the agency says: cover crops can help improve soil quality and interrupt cycles of pests.

The decline in managed honeybees — both in the U.S. and abroad — has grabbed headlines over the last few years. That decline hasn’t slowed: a May report published by the Bee Informed Partnership, Apiary Inspectors of America, and the USDA [found](#) that U.S. beekeepers lost 42.1 percent of their bees from April 2014 to April 2015, with some states seeing losses as high as 60 percent. The survey also found that, for the first time, bee colony losses in summer surpassed losses in winter, with beekeepers losing 27.4 percent of their bees over the summer. According to the organizations involved in the research, bee losses of 18.7 percent are the maximum that beekeepers can endure and still be economically viable.



Winter losses were slightly lower than the previous year, but experts warn that it's too soon to consider that a trend.

“We went from horrible to bad,” Dennis vanEngelsdorp, co-author of the report and assistant professor of entomology at the University of Maryland, told ThinkProgress in May. “So instead of losing one in three, we’re losing one in five.”

The federal government has taken steps in recent years to combat this loss in honeybees, which the USDA notes pollinate \$15 billion worth of crops every year. The White House [announced](#) a national strategy to combat pollinator losses in May, an effort that includes a goal of reducing winter honeybee losses to no more than 15 percent in the next 10 years. The strategy grew out of a pollinator task force created by executive order last year and includes increasing research and surveying efforts on honeybees. And, in line with the USDA’s efforts, the strategy includes a goal to “restore or enhance” seven million acres of pollinator-friendly habitat over the next five years.

The strategy also names pesticides as a possible factor in bee losses. One particularly publicized class of pesticides — neonicotinoids — have been found by researchers to cause bees to forget the smell of food, and [many groups and businesses](#) have called on the government to do more to protect bees from them.

“Mitigating the effects of pesticides on bees is a priority for the Federal government, as both bee pollination and insect control are essential to the success of agriculture,” the White House strategy reads. “Through actions outlined in this strategy, the federal government seeks to create physical and temporal space between the use of pesticides

and those areas and times when pollinators are present.”

Other threats to bees include the varroa mite, which attach themselves to bees and suck out their circulatory fluid (the bees’ equivalent of blood). The mites can spread dangerous viruses to the bees including one that results in crumpled-up, useless wings in young bees. And poor nutrition — caused by lack of foraging ground — is also [likely contributing](#) to summer losses.

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