

# New working group gears up to get answers about habitat conservation

Maintaining habitat is also important for pollinators and parasitoids that prey on crop pests



Canola Council of Canada agronomist Greg Sekulic is a member of the new habitat conservation group that is working to research and spread the message about habitat conservation. PHOTO: SUPPLIED

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Staff

When you cut down your shelterbelt or take out a windrow, you might not think about the effect it has on the beneficial species living on your farmland. A new working group, unofficially known as the Habitat Working Group, is gearing up to inform producers about the changes they can make to conserve habitat for birds, pollinators and other beneficial insects.

"Habitat loss is caused by farm consolidation and wetland drainage, as well as taking new land into production," said Greg Sekulic, a Peace Region-based agronomist with the Canola Council of Canada and a member of the Habitat Working Group.

"Farm consolidation, which involves taking out fencerows between previously existing fields, is a huge thing in southern Saskatchewan. And GPS-based drainage programs can take out seasonal wetlands that are repositories of biodiversity," he said.

Wooded tree areas, windrows and shelterbelts are disappearing as drainage becomes more efficient, resulting in a huge loss of habitat. Discussion about these issues inspired a group of concerned industry representatives to form the Habitat Working Group at last year's Pollinators and Agriculture symposium in Saskatoon. Group members include Ducks Unlimited Canada, Pulse Canada, CropLife Canada, the Pollinator Partnership and the Canadian Fertilizer Institute.

The industry-led national working group is focused on finding and disseminating data on habitat conservation and how it impacts beneficial species. Instead of one group leading the charge, the working group is pooling resources and working with other commodity groups to spread the word and

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influence necessary research and extension.

"One thing we want to do is find out exactly what habitat is required and what types of plant species are required to be hospitable to beneficial insects in crops," said Sekulic.

When the group met this April, it shared literature and resources, and it will be pushing to have research done to quantify the benefits of habitat conservation to the ecosystem and to an individual operation on a per-acre basis. The group is also looking into research on the importance of creating beetle buffers, and maintaining beneficial carabid beetles on the landscape. The working group will be disseminating this information to various commodity groups.

An extra day has been added to the Canola Discovery Forum, to be held in Canmore in October, for a special research workshop with agronomists, ecologists and entomologists to discuss studies on yield and ecological benefits of maintaining habitat.

## What producers can do right now

"Producers should really be thinking about maintaining their critical biodiversity on their farmscape, because these things are hugely important on a landscape level. Farmers

sometimes underestimate what their impact is on landscape diversity. Taking out a couple of low spots doesn't seem like much, until you aggregate what is happening all across Western Canada. We really want guys to be cognizant of that," said Sekulic.

Maintaining habitat beside cropland can have a benefit for crop yields. Many of the sustainable agriculture certification initiatives feature an emphasis on conserving habitat and landscape biodiversity.

Producers can do many small things to conserve habitat. Canola produces nectar and pollen in July, but there aren't a lot of other nectar-bearing sources in Western Canada during the rest of the growing season. Many parasitic wasps that feed on pest species require flowering plants to complete their life cycle.

Sekulic recommends that producers skip the second herbicide pass to leave a few kilograms per acre of flowering and native weed biomass out in the crop — not enough to affect yield, but enough to help beneficial insects complete their life cycle.

All of the group members will be advocating against the prophylactic use of insecticide.

When a producer sprays an unnecessary product into a wheat or canola crop, they could be killing the beneficial parasitoids that preyed on the pests that infested last year's crop. The field across the road will then miss out on some valuable parasitic species.

Keeping trees and wet areas in the landscape can preserve water receptacles. Shelterbelts and tree bluffs slow down wind and let snow pile up, keeping moisture on the landscape.

"If you're taking out a tree bluff that is in the way, consider relocating it instead of eliminating it entirely, so you give species a chance to complete their life cycles," said Sekulic.

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