

January 29, 2026

Dear Chair Bennett, First Vice Chair Phillips, Second Vice Chair Carson, and Members of the House Environment Natural Resources Committee,

I am writing to provide you with my comments regarding House Bill No. H7074 to amend Section 24-8-11 of the General Laws in Chapter 24-8 entitled "Construction and Maintenance of State Roads", such that it expands the areas to be included in the respective plantings, further defines what types of plants are to be included, and adds the requirement of seeking professional advice on what specific species are to be planted.

I fully support H 7074 and urge you to vote in favor of it.

Unfortunately, I was not aware of the hearing on this legislation until just yesterday and, therefore, I did not have the opportunity to provide you with in-person testimony. However, I would like to use this opportunity to provide you with my comments.

We are presently in a pollinator crisis - the significant global decline in populations of bees, butterflies, birds, and bats that pollinate plants, threatening food security and ecosystem health due to widespread habitat loss, pesticide use, climate change, and invasive species. This decline impacts agriculture and natural environments by reducing plant reproduction, creating urgent needs for research, conservation, and habitat restoration.

“Pollinators are essential to life as we know it: they pollinate 80 percent of all plants and 90 percent of all flowering plants – the very plants that turn the sun’s energy into the food that supports animal life on terrestrial Earth”.<sup>1</sup>

One of the key threats of pollinator decline is that natural areas rich in flowering plants are replaced by development, roadways, and monoculture agriculture, reducing food and nesting sites.

One simple way to address this issue is to create more pollinator habitat by planting diverse **native** flowers, creating meadows, and providing nesting sites (like pithy stems or dead wood).

According to the Rhode Island Highways Best Practices Design guide<sup>2</sup>, approximately **216,300 acres of roadside right of way** are maintained by the state. This presents a massive opportunity to provide a significant amount of pollinator habitat to help to address the current pollinator crisis. Notably, the road median should NOT be used for such

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Douglas W. Tallamy, *How Can I Help – Saving Nature with Your Yard* (Timber Press, 2025), 324.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.scenic.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ri\\_highway\\_best\\_practices\\_design\\_guide\\_2014.pdf](https://www.scenic.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ri_highway_best_practices_design_guide_2014.pdf)

habitat. Studies have shown that much mortality of pollinators occurs when the pollinators travel to and from highway medians.<sup>3</sup>

California, Connecticut, Colorado, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, New Mexico, Oregon and Vermont all have pollinator roadside programs. Additionally, Connecticut, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Mexico, New York and Washington have policies to plant pollinator-friendly plants on state lands.<sup>4</sup> **Rhode Island should take the appropriate actions to establish such programs and policies such that they will be added to both of these lists.**

The planting of native keystone species of plants<sup>5</sup> – those which support the most caterpillars and animal pollinators (including bees – especially native bees, moths, beetles, butterflies, and other species (e.g., milkweed, ironweed, goldenrod, asters, etc.) – and which are preferably native to Rhode Island (refer to the [RI Native Plant Guide](#))<sup>6</sup> or at least the Northeastern U.S., is needed to help in the effort to halt the ongoing insect apocalypse and associated massive decline of pollinators and birds.

Also, what needs to be included in any plan for managing the roadsides planted for pollinators is the proper timing for mowing. While mowing is needed to control the encroachment of weedy shrubs or invasive woody plants in what will be wildflower meadows, mowing can cause direct insect mortality, especially for eggs and larvae—they can't avoid a mower! To reduce harm to insects, it is advised to mow either in late fall – after the first frost - or in early spring (when temperatures consistently reach 50°F).

Late fall mowing allows seeds to drop, while early spring mowing allows beneficial insects to emerge. If possible, the mowing should be rotational, that is, only mowing a portion (1/3 to 1/2) of the strip or area each year to leave refuge for wildlife. The cutting height should be at least 6-8 inches to avoid harming insects and damaging plants. It is also advised to use a flushing bar - a long metal bar with dangling chains or ropes attached to the front of a tractor - to prevent "cutting" nesting birds, insects, and other animals by forcing them to flee before the mower reaches them, and to use low mower speeds.

Notably, several years ago, representatives from the Pollinator Working Group -the state legislated group appointed to work on the issue of neonicotinoid pesticides – led by Meg Kerr, former policy director for the Audubon Society of Rhode Island, met with representatives from the RI Department of Transportation to seek a cooperative plan to alter the mowing schedules along highway roadsides at that time in an attempt to develop and enhance pollinator habitat. Unfortunately, this was met with much apprehension and, thus, we were not successful in obtaining a voluntary enactment of such a program.

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<sup>3</sup> Douglas W. Tallamy, *What's the Rush? The Solution to the Biodiversity Crisis* video, 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Environment America, [States that are doing the most to save pollinators](#), June 16, 2025

<sup>5</sup> [NWF-GFW-keystone-plant-list-ecoregion-8-eastern-temperate-forests.pdf](#)

<sup>6</sup> [RI Native Plant Guide](#)

Therefore, it is apparent that legislation is needed in order to enact such a program that is more than well overdue.

In summary, for the sake of pollinators and all of us, I urge you to vote in favor of H 7074.

Sincerely,

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Member of the former State of RI Pollinator Working Group