Transcript of Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns Remarks to the Pollinating Partners Celebration Ceremony and Release of a New U.S. Stamp Washington D.C. - June 29, 2007

SEC. MIKE JOHANNS: Well, thank you for that nice introduction and very nice welcome. I appreciate it. As mentioned, in October I signed a proclamation dedicating this week to pollinators. National Pollinators Week celebrates the important role that pollinators play in our ecosystem, and we hope that through that effort we will increase public awareness of their importance.

Butterflies and humming bees are more than just decorative, nice additions to our gardens. Bats are helpful members of our environment, not fearsome animals from some Hollywood film, and bees do much, much more than just produce honey. All these creatures perform crucial roles in pollinating the crops that literally feed our nation.

About three-quarters of the more than 240,000 species of the world's flowering plants rely on pollinators for reproduction; in fact, pollination is responsible for $15 billion in added crop value, and it's especially important for specialty crop producers, those who produce products like nuts, berries, fruits, vegetables.

It takes the help of 1.3 million honeybee colonies to produce our annual almond crop in the state of California, and pollinators also help with the reproduction of crops that feed our cattle. They are a primary link in the chain of our food system, and without their contribution we would not enjoy the abundant food supply that provides both nutrition and income for our nation.

What better way to increase public awareness of the importance of pollinators than presenting them to the nation on a set of stamps. With our national distribution and their widespread recognition stamps have a public impact unlike any other medium. And I'm very pleased that the Post Office has chosen to honor this segment of our agricultural community.

It is my hope that these stamps will bring great awareness of pollinators into homes across this nation. And increased awareness is enormously important to pollinators right now. We have seen population declines across many varieties of pollinators. Two of the three United States species of bats are listed as endangered. Honeybee colonies have been slowly declining actually since the 1940s. They've dwindled from 5 million colonies in that decade to half that number today. And recently honeybees have been suffering from a phenomena known as Colony Collapse Disorder, or CCD for short.

The honeybee population is absolutely critical to agricultural production, and 90 percent of our apples and blueberries are pollinated by honeybees. Nearly half our peach crop depends on them, and more than 25 percent of our orange production. CCD is a significant problem, and it's affecting bees in 35 states. It is characterized by a rapid loss of adult worker bees. Intact stores of pollen and honey are left in the colony but few or no dead bees can be found.

In the six months between September of '06 and March of this year, some beekeepers reported losses in their colonies as high as 80 to 100 percent. If left unchecked, Colony Collapse Disorder has the potential to cause a $15 billion direct loss of crop production and $75 billion in indirect losses.

While we are unsure about the cause or causes of CCD, we are investigating four major areas: stress related to nutrition, transportation, and beekeepers' colony management strategy, parasite mites, pathogens like bacteria, fungi, or viruses, and pesticides.

Last year, USDA's Agricultural Research Service, or ARS for short, formed a CCD working group with a number of universities. It sampled colonies affected with CCD and found a large number of disease-causing organisms --but again, no real specific cause. ARS has also been doing research into the basic biology of bees that builds on insights gained from the recently-sequenced honeybee genome.

This fiscal year ARS will spend about $7.4 million on honeybee research, focused on mites, pathogens and nutrition. And USDA's Cooperative State Research Education and Extension Service will commit another $1.7 million per year to honeybee and pollinator

research and $1 million in funding per year is now being redirected to support a full-scale project on honeybee health.

We recognize that a concerted, well-funded research and extension effort is needed to ensure the health of these essential pollinators. That's why we proposed in the 2007 Farm Bill proposals that we include increased research funding and the consolidation of USDA's research offices so that we can more efficiently and effectively pursue critical research goals like the ones I've described.

We also strive to maintain the strength of our agricultural industry and our ecosystem for our conservation program. Farmers have a vested interest in being good stewards of the land. They know maybe better than anyone else that our sustenance depends on healthy soil and on clean water. As our population grows and demands on the land increase, we must increase all we can do in terms of practicing sustainable agriculture, and we must put polices in place that encourage this. We support sustainable practices that protect our lands and our water and air, our wildlife, such as pollinators that are so central to our lives and our livelihoods.

That's why our Farm Bill proposals call for $7.8 billion in new funding for conservation programs. We can't afford to take conservation lightly. Non-federal ag enforced lands cover 1.4 billion acres, and that's nearly 70 percent of the contiguous United States. We want to maintain a healthy environment that preserves our natural resources that we have been truly blessed with. That means keeping a healthy population of pollinators. They are part of a complex environmental chain which can be severely damaged when one component is removed.

These stamps today will highlight their importance, and I hope they will encourage the public to learn more about our pollinators, what they bring to food and to the flowers that we enjoy every day that we are on this earth.

Thank you very much.

[Applause.]