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'Bee man' advocates polinator-friendly solar projects

By BRUCE HOTCHKISS
Senior Editor

(March 28, 2017) He's earned the moniker of "the bee man."

He shows up at hearings on applications for utility scale solar installations to promote the planting of flowers and other pollinator habitat in the vast acreage around and under the solar panels of utility-scale projects. He is Rob Davis, media and innovative specialist for a Minnesota firm called Fresh Energy, which describes itself as "an independent nonprofit organization working to speed the transition to a clean energy economy." Displaying a large color photograph of bees visiting an expansive planting of Blackeyed Susans and other flowers around a solar display, Davis argues that environmentally beneficial concept not only softens the often harsh presentation of the panels in the field but also responds to the repair of a depressed bee population.

An awareness that applications for utility-scale solar installations on the farmland of the Eastern Shore has mobilized citizen opposition most currently in Kent and Dorchester counties.

The citizen forces argue that huge solar arrays run counter to the environment and culture of the Eastern Shore and ultimately could put the Shore's agricultural heritage in an industry out of order.

Davis turns to his home state of Minnesota, where, he said, workers are preparing to seed more than 30 million native, pollinator-friendly plants, low-growing and shade-tolerant flowers and prairie grasses will be established, surprisingly, under ground-mounted solar panels.

It's part of a project called Aurora by a Minnesota firm which, Davis related, "worked with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources to create a robust vegetation plan that creates a bio diverse habitat for pollinator species.

"These sites will also preserve the soil for future farming, and will channel storm water into the aquifer. The company also is working with a local agricultural monitor during construction to integrate the best seeding and soil mix at each site. This will help preserve and protect the farmland throughout the life of the project," Davis said.

With other projects in the works, Minnesota will have more than 26 million acres of row crops farmland still under tillage, Davis said, meaning "these solar sites will use less than 0.02 percent of Minnesota's abundant farmland."

The bee situation, across the nation and here, is critical. Pollinators, like birds and bees, are a vital part of the nation's agricultural system.

According to a White House report, crop pollination by honeybees contributes a value of more than \$15 billion to our agricultural system every year.

However, according to the United Nations' pollinator assessment, "more than 40 percent of invertebrate pollinator species, particularly bees and butterflies, face extinction."

Maryland has more than 14,000 registered honeybee colonies, according to Maryland State Agriculture statistics.

The average replacement cost per colony is \$150 with colonies ranging from a \$100 package to \$200 per nucleus colony.

In Baltimore, Bill Castro runs the Bee Friendly Apiary. He writes "the year 2016 will be known to Maryland beekeepers as another year of extremely heavy losses.

According to Bee Informed Partnership, losses exceeded 56 percent in 2016. Over a three-year average, Maryland beekeepers have lost 54 percent of their total colonies."

Maryland State Sen. Thomas (Mac) Middleton, himself a Charles County farmer, is co-sponsor of a bill — SB 1158, which proposes to establish a standard for pollinator-friendly solar in Maryland.

Among its 21 provisions, it calls for an "evaluation of the pollinator benefits that would occur under a pollinator friendly vegetation management standard ... on land containing a ground-mounted solar generation facility."



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