

TECHNICAL BRIEF

Endangered and Protected Species, Program 195

POLLINATOR AND WILDLIFE HABITAT CERTIFICATION PROGRAMS

An Overview of Voluntary Biodiversity and Pollinator Certification Programs in the United States and Canada

ABSTRACT

Electric power companies, farmers, businesses, and individuals have responded to the decline in pollinator populations by looking for opportunities to manage portions of their landholdings as pollinator habitat. As individuals and organizations work to stabilize pollinator populations, questions have arisen as to whether some of the actions taken have measurable ecological outcomes or ecological value. Various organizations have attempted to develop certification programs that set criteria to define actions necessary to build and maintain habitat, but there is a wide range of certification development processes, program requirements, and certification rigor. This report summarizes the pollinator and wildlife certification programs currently available at a national level in the United States and Canada.

INTRODUCTION

Declines in pollinator populations over the last decade are causing global concern. Domestic and international organizations, including the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, Intergovernmental Science–Policy Platform for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, are leading research, defining conservation goals, and considering actions related to pollinators. These efforts have resulted in a growing public understanding of the problem and the desire to take action to restore or create pollinator habitat in a variety of public and private locations.

Some electric power companies have responded to the decline in pollinator populations by looking for opportunities to manage portions of their landholdings for pollinator habitat. Companies are interested in being recognized for their conservation efforts, particularly those companies that go beyond what is required by environmental laws. These voluntary efforts are reported in annual environmental, social, and governance (ESG) documents, media articles, websites, and positive public-facing communication. Certification programs can be valuable to companies for elevating public recognition and reinforcing the credibility of their efforts. The establishment of habitat certification programs has attempted to provide a baseline standard to define what constitutes a pollinator habitat that will result in positive ecological outcomes, and what minimum actions are necessary to develop and maintain the habitat once established.

However, as power companies and others work to stabilize pollinator populations, questions have arisen as to whether some of the actions taken have measurable ecological outcomes that actually benefit pollinators. What does the certification mean in terms of confirmed benefits to pollinators? Various organizations have attempted to develop certification programs that set standards to define attributes necessary for wildlife and pollinator habitat, and there is currently a large range of certification development processes, program requirements, and rigor in the programs.

This report summarizes the voluntary pollinator habitat certification programs currently available in the United States and Canada.



Research Approach

This research was conducted by internet searches for national habitat certification programs in the United States and Canada. Keywords used for internet searches included *habitat certification*, *pollinator certification*, and *wildlife certification*. Content for research was identified by visiting websites for habitat certification programs.

We focused on habitat certification programs developed by national organizations that provided the opportunity for certification in every state or province. This report does not cover state, city, or local-level programs; “affiliation” programs, such as Bee City USA (Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation); or guidance “scorecards” for self-evaluating habitat. A representative sample of programs for state, city, or local areas is included in the appendix.

The research is current as of March 2023.

Programs Reviewed

Table 1 summarizes the habitat certification programs identified and reviewed for this report and the organization that provides the standards for the program.

Table 1. National habitat certification programs reviewed

ORGANIZATION	PROGRAM NAME
Canadian Wildlife Federation	Garden Habitat Certification
Monarch Watch	Monarch Waystations
National Wildlife Federation	Certified Wildlife Habitat
North American Butterfly Association	Butterfly Garden Certification
Pollinator Partnership	Bee Friendly Farming
Pollinator Partnership	Bee Friendly Gardening
ROW Stewardship Council	ROW Accreditation
Wildlife Habitat Council	Conservation Certification
Xerces Society	Bee Better (Farm)

CERTIFICATION PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS

This section provides an overview of the intent of national voluntary habitat certification programs in the United States and Canada. Use of a certification by individuals or corporations provides recognition for supporting wildlife habitat, and for programs with verification requirements, provides a level of assurance to stakeholders and the public that the actions taken meet a minimum set of requirements as defined by the certifying organization.

Definitions

In the context of habitat certification programs are several terms used to describe various activities or requirements, and these terms are not always clearly defined by the certifying organization. To address the differences in usage and/or meaning among the certification programs reviewed in this report, the following definitions will be applied to each program equally, regardless of the descriptors used by the certifying organization.

certification. Written concurrence from a certifying organization that a particular site (or company) has taken or is taking appropriate steps to develop and maintain habitat that is supportive of and beneficial to wildlife or pollinators, in compliance with the requirements of the certifying program. This typically requires submission of written documents and photographs as part of an application process and could require review of submitted documents and/or site visits.

certification program. A set of requirements developed and maintained by a certifying organization that allows interested parties to voluntarily submit an application to certify that a particular site has developed a habitat area beneficial to wildlife and/or pollinators, or that a company has developed written standards and procedures that result in benefits to wildlife and/or pollinators.

certifying organization. An organization (typically not-for-profit) acknowledged to be national leaders in habitat conservation and/or restoration, consisting at least in part of subject matter experts (SMEs) in the field of habitat restoration, conservation, or design, that has the knowledge, skills, and abilities to determine whether a habitat is beneficial for the purpose of attracting and supporting native wildlife.

renewal or recertification. The requirement by some certification programs to provide evidence of new, changed, or ongoing activities to develop and maintain the certified habitat.

self-reporting. The process used by some certifying organizations to allow a landowner or public space (home garden, school, park, commercial area, and so on) to state that they meet the requirements of a certification program without submitting supporting documentation or undergoing a site visit.

third-party verification. Review of documents and/or performance of site visits by SMEs who are not employed by the certifying organization and who have the necessary expertise and training to perform project reviews.



verification. A process used by some certifying organizations to evaluate the veracity of information submitted as part of a certification application. This might include document review and/or site visits.

Certification Program Basis

All the certification programs reviewed for this report appear to be based on current wildlife and/or pollinator research. Most programs recommend building a habitat containing food, water, and shelter using native plants, and having multiple pollinator-friendly species blooming for the entire growing season. Most recommend sustainable gardening or habitat maintenance practices, such as decreasing water usage, removing invasive plant species, and decreasing or discontinuing the use of pesticides, herbicides, and chemical fertilizers, or using these compounds as part of an integrated management plan.

The primary difference between programs appears to revolve around whether the intent is to motivate or recognize individuals or communities or to recognize and verify actions taken by corporations. The number of requirements, and particularly the documentation requirements, are much more rigorous for the corporate certifications than those for communities/individuals. Requirements for corporate programs often include written integrated vegetation management plans and strategies for desirable and undesirable species. All the corporate programs require application review by either internal or third parties in the form of document audits and/or site visits, and several require renewal of the certification on a regular basis.

The corporate certification programs that require items such as extensive written documentation, certifying organization or third-party verification, document audits, and program renewal appear to be based on the same published scientific research as the community/individual programs. The difference between the certification programs for individuals and those for corporations lies in the rigor of the documentation and verification requirements. Community/individual programs researched for this report all rely on self-reporting from the applicant, typically in the form of an online questionnaire with checkboxes from which applicants select to indicate that they meet each requirement. The corporate programs typically require written planning, implementation, and management documentation that is reviewed by either the certifying organization or a third-party SME to ensure that the program requirements are met prior to awarding the certification. Some of the corporate certifications also have a recertification period, which is absent from the community/individual programs.

The requirement to undergo review and/or audits by the certifying organization or a third party provides confirmation that the objectives as well as the individual requirements of the certification program have been met. Although this does not guarantee that a specific ecological outcome will be achieved, it does verify that the conditions to achieve ecological benefits have been developed and that management processes to maintain the conditions are in place. Voluntary certification programs with verification requirements provide assurances to stakeholders and the public that claims made by the entity receiving the certification are founded on current scientific research, have been implemented according to written plans, and are maintained in a way that provides continued benefits to wildlife.

Certification Characteristics

Certain characteristics are shared between most of the individual/community and corporate programs reviewed. These included:

- Application fee
- Signage that can be displayed as part of the certification
- Educational materials for habitat development available from sponsoring organization
- Requirements for forage/food, water, nesting habitat, and reduction or elimination of herbicides and pesticides
- Suggested practices that improve the sustainability of the habitat development and maintenance, such as soil and water conservation, exotic and invasive species removal, and use of native species

Again, the main difference between the number and rigor of the requirements for certification is the program's objective. The programs that are intended primarily to serve as motivation or recognition of actions by those who would not normally be SMEs in the area of habitat restoration and/or conservation (individuals such as homeowners, businesses, and public sites such as parks, places of worship, and golf courses) carry fewer requirements for application, suggest rather than require sustainable practices, and allow the party submitting the application to self-report whether the program requirements were met. Those that are intended to provide certification for corporate lands that would be managed by SMEs (habitat restoration and conservation projects, utility rights-of-way, farms) have more specific requirements and require review and approval by a verification process to achieve certification. In addition, the individual/community programs (with one exception) do not require renewal or recertification, whereas the corporate programs require recertification at regular intervals. The intentions of the reviewed programs are summarized in Table 2.



Table 2. Intended primary audience of certification programs

COMMUNITY/INDIVIDUAL	CORPORATIONS/SMES
Canadian Wildlife Federation	ROW Stewardship Council
Monarch Watch	Wildlife Habitat Council
National Wildlife Federation	Xerces Society
North American Butterfly Association	Pollinator Partnership
Pollinator Partnership	

The difference in planning, implementation, and maintenance for the two types of programs is most clearly delineated by the written document requirement of the corporate programs, as summarized in Table 3. The plans that are primarily intended for the public do not require any written plans for implementation or maintenance, whereas the corporate programs require extensive written documentation.

Table 3. Requirements for written management plans

NO WRITTEN PLAN REQUIREMENT	WRITTEN PLAN REQUIREMENTS
Canadian Wildlife Federation	Pollinator Partnership Bee Friendly Farming
Monarch Watch	ROW Stewardship Council
National Wildlife Federation	Wildlife Habitat Council
North American Butterfly Association	Xerces Society
Pollinator Partnership Bee Friendly Gardening	

The programs that require the most steps for certification typically include a review of application documentation, and some also require a site visit by a qualified inspector (see Figure 1). The document review, site visit, and renewal (recertification) requirements of the corporate programs are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Summary of certification program review, site visit, and renewal requirements

PROGRAM	DOCUMENT REVIEW	SITE VISIT	RENEWAL
Wildlife Habitat Council	Third party*	None	Gold tier – every three years; other tiers – every two years
Pollinator Partnership Bee Friendly Farming	Certifying organization staff	Certifying organization staff	Annual
ROW Stewardship Council	Certifying organization staff	Third party	Five years
Xerces Society Bee Better	Third party	Third party	Reconfirm practices annually, full recertification every three years
Canadian Wildlife Federation	None	None	None
Monarch Watch	None	None	None
National Wildlife Federation	None	None	None
North American Butterfly Association	None	None	None
Pollinator Partnership Bee Friendly Gardening	None	None	Annual

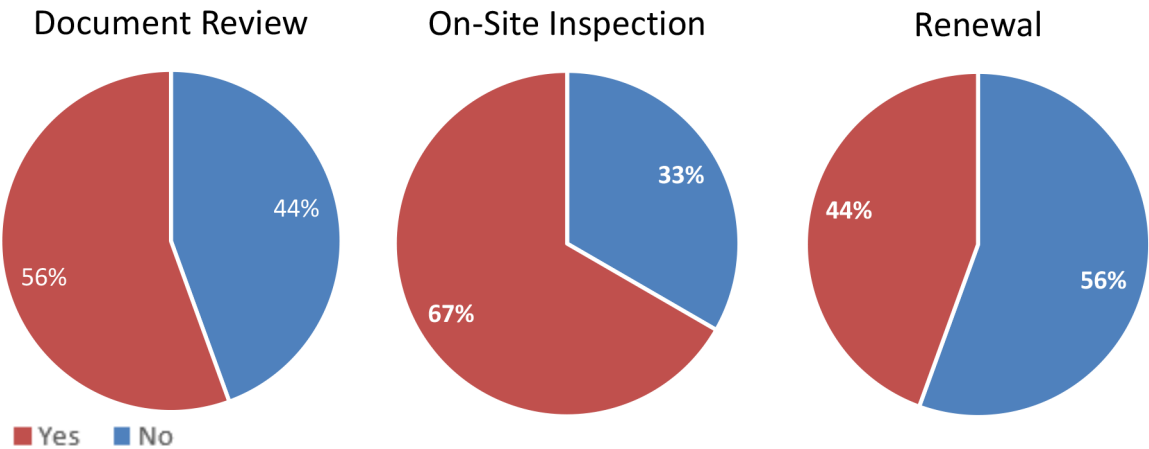


Figure 1. Number of certifications requiring document review, on-site inspection, and recertification

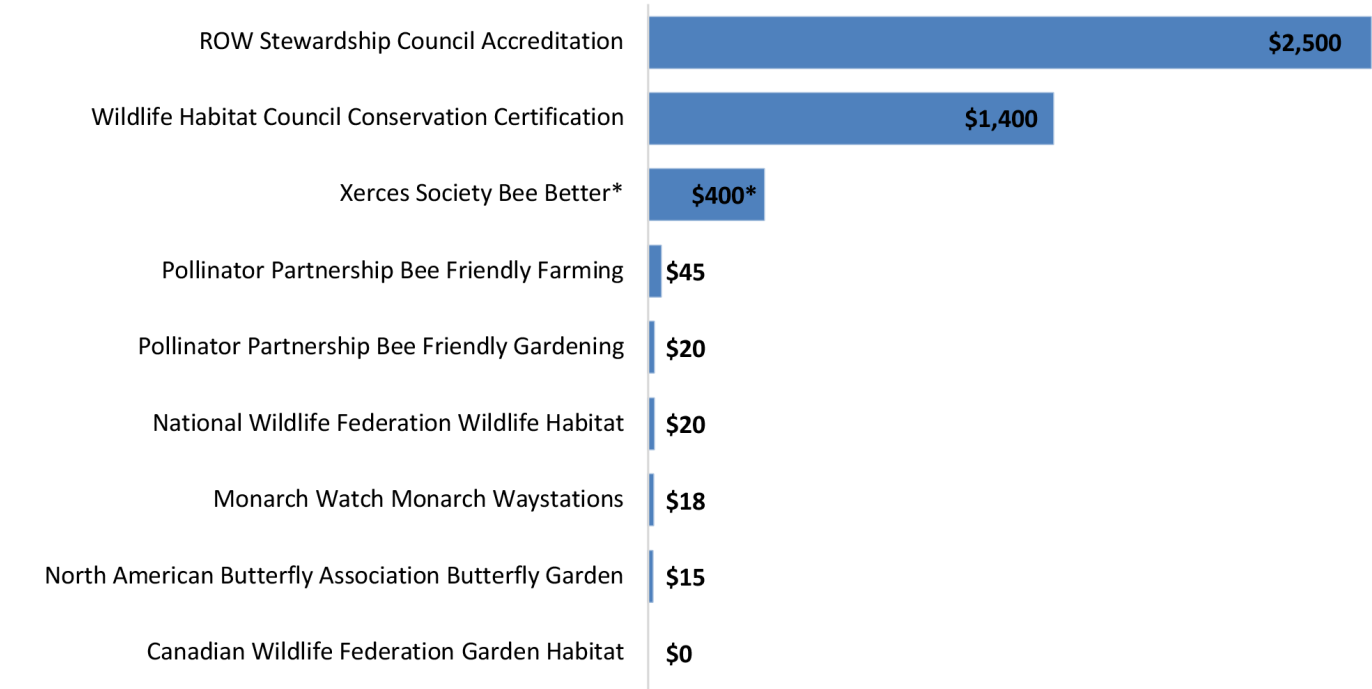
Another difference between most of the individual/community programs and the corporate programs is the application fee. The cost of community programs that rely on self-reporting with no document review, site visit, or recertification requirements is much lower than corporate programs that have some or all of those requirements (Figure 2).

Each program was reviewed for the following:

- Application cost
- Application documentation requirements
- Certification requirements
- On-site inspection requirements
- Review requirements

- Renewal or recertification requirements
- Whether educational materials were provided on the program website
- Whether signage was included as part of the certification
- Certifiable locations
- Suggested practices to improve habitat (not required for certification)

The rest of this section summarizes each program reviewed for this report.



*Xerces Society Bee Better application fee is \$400. Document review and site visits are additional cost.

Figure 2. Certification program application fee



Certification Programs

Canadian Wildlife Federation Garden Habitat Certification

Website <https://cwf-fcf.org/en/explore/gardening-for-wildlife/action/get-certified/>

Application Cost	\$0
On-Site Inspection Required	No
Third-Party Review Required	No
Renewal or Recertification Required	No
Educational Materials on Website	Yes
Signage Available	Yes
CERTIFICATION LOCATIONS	CERTIFICATION REQUIREMENTS
Home	Three food types
School	One water source
Park	Three types of shelter
Business/organization	Two green gardening practices
Group/club	
Other	
SUGGESTED PRACTICES	APPLICATION DOCUMENTATION REQUIREMENTS
Rain barrels	None
Limit water use	
Drip or soaker hose	
Leaves as mulch or compost	
Grass clippings as mulch	
Rain garden	
Composter	
Riparian buffer	
Xeriscaping	
Integrated pest management	
Remove invasive plants	
Use native plants	
Reduce lawn area	
Eliminate pesticides	

Monarch Watch Monarch Waystations

Website <https://www.monarchwatch.org/waystations/certify.html>

Application Cost	\$18
On-Site Inspection Required	No
Third-Party Review Required	No
Renewal or Recertification Required	No
Educational Materials on Website	Yes
Signage Available	Yes
CERTIFICATION LOCATIONS	CERTIFICATION REQUIREMENTS
Business	Provide shelter
Community park/garden	Habitat contains milkweed
Farm	Habitat contains one type of annual or biennial nectar plant
Golf course	Habitat contains one type of perennial nectar plant
Home	
Nature or education center	
Place of worship	
Retirement home	
Zoo	
School	
Other	
SUGGESTED PRACTICES	APPLICATION DOCUMENTATION REQUIREMENTS
Add other features (feeders, nesting, host plants)	None
Amend soil prior to planting	
Eliminate insecticide use	
Manage plot density	
Mulch for water retention and weed control	
Remove dead stalks by mowing, burning, or by hand	
Remove invasive species	
Use natural compost for fertilizer	
Water plot as needed	

National Wildlife Federation Certified Wildlife Habitat

Website <https://www.nwf.org/certify>

Application Cost	\$20
On-Site Inspection Required	No
Third-Party Review Required	No
Renewal or Recertification Required	No
Educational Materials on Website	Yes
Signage Available	Yes
CERTIFICATION LOCATIONS	CERTIFICATION REQUIREMENTS
Home	Three food types or supplemental feeders
School	One source of water
Organization or business	Two types of shelter
Farm	Two types of nesting habitat
Roadside or right-of-way	Sustainable practices from two of three categories
Community garden	
Place of worship	
Nature center	
Park/forest/refuge	
SUGGESTED PRACTICES	APPLICATION DOCUMENTATION REQUIREMENTS
Riparian buffer	None
Capture rainwater from roof	
Xeriscaping	
Drip or soaker hose irrigation	
Limit water use	
Reduce erosion	
Use mulch	
Rain garden	
Integrated pest management	
Remove non-native plants and animals	
Use native plants	
Reduce lawn areas	
Eliminate chemical pesticides	
Eliminate chemical fertilizers	
Compost	

North American Butterfly Association Butterfly Garden Certification

Website <http://nababutterfly.com/butterfly-garden-certification-program/>

Application Cost	\$15–\$25
On-Site Inspection Required	No
Third-Party Review Required	No
Renewal or Recertification Required	No
Educational Materials on Website	Yes
Signage Available	Yes
CERTIFICATION LOCATIONS	CERTIFICATION REQUIREMENTS
Home	Three different native caterpillar food plants
School	Three different native butterfly nectar plants
Municipal/park	
Retirement home	
Place of worship	
Business	
SUGGESTED PRACTICES	APPLICATION DOCUMENTATION REQUIREMENTS
Use native plants	List three nectar plants on property
Do not use pesticides	List three caterpillar host plants on property
Grow more than one plant of each species	

Pollinator Partnership Bee Friendly Farming

Website <https://www.pollinator.org/bff/bff-us>

Application Cost	\$45 corporate
On-Site Inspection Required	Not required, but 3–6% of sites visited annually
Third-Party Review Required	No
Renewal or Recertification Required	Yes
Educational Materials on Website	Yes
Signage Available	No
CERTIFICATION LOCATIONS	CERTIFICATION REQUIREMENTS
Farm	Bee forage on 3% of land
Ranch	Blooms throughout growing season
Winery	Clean water
Other commercial land use	Permanent nesting habitat
Home	Integrated pest management
Community garden	Reduce or eliminate chemicals
Other non-commercial garden	Infestation prevention
Apiarists	
SUGGESTED PRACTICES	APPLICATION DOCUMENTATION REQUIREMENTS
Pest monitoring and identification	Plant species list
Monitoring threshold decision-making	Images of forage habitat
Prevention of infestations	Images of water sources
Resistance management	Images of bee nesting habitat
Management strategy evaluation and improvement	Property map with delineated areas
Combined chemical, physical, biological, and cultural control methods	Pest management protocol
	If applicable, proof of good standing with other accepted certifications (Bee Better, CASP, and so on)

Pollinator Partnership Bee Friendly Gardening

Website <https://www.pollinator.org/bfg#>

Application Cost	\$20 individual
On-Site Inspection Required	No
Third-Party Review Required	No
Renewal or Recertification Required	Yes
Educational Materials on Website	Yes
Signage Available	Yes
CERTIFICATION LOCATIONS	CERTIFICATION REQUIREMENTS
Home garden	Nectar and pollen-providing plants
Public garden	Habitat and nesting areas
Community/food garden	No chemical application to blooming plants or when pollinators are foraging
SUGGESTED PRACTICES	APPLICATION DOCUMENTATION REQUIREMENTS
Integrated pest management plan	Pollinator-friendly plant list
Provide a water source	Photographs of pollinator plants
Reduce or eliminate pesticide use	Pictures of nesting habitat

ROW Stewardship Council Right-of-Way Accreditation

Website <https://rowstewardship.org/index.php>

Application Cost	\$2,500
On-Site Inspection Required	Yes
Third-Party Review Required	Yes
Renewal or Recertification Required	No
Educational Materials on Website	No
Signage Available	No
CERTIFICATION LOCATIONS	CERTIFICATION REQUIREMENTS
Rights-of-way	Compliance with laws, standards, and BMPs Tenure and Use Rights and Responsibilities Community relations Management planning Understanding pest and ecosystem dynamics Establishing tolerance levels Compilation of an array of vegetation maintenance techniques Accounting for economic and ecological effects of treatments Site-specific implementation of treatments Monitoring and adaptive management
SUGGESTED SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES	APPLICATION DOCUMENTATION REQUIREMENTS
NA	Map of right-of-way system

Wildlife Habitat Council Conservation Certification

Website <https://www.wildlifehc.org/certification/>

Application Cost	\$1,400 member/\$2,800 non-member
On-Site Inspection Required	No
Third-Party Review Required	No
Renewal or Recertification Required	Yes
Educational Materials on Website	Yes
Signage Available	Yes
CERTIFICATION LOCATIONS	CERTIFICATION REQUIREMENTS
Habitat project type (caves, desert, and so on)	Project is locally appropriate
Species project type (avian, bats, and so on)	Exceeds regulatory requirements
Rights-of-way	Documented measurable outcomes
Education project types (training, learning, and so on)	Provides conservation or conservation education value
Other project types (green infrastructure, remediation, and so on)	Has conservation or conservation education objectives
Gardens (pollinator, rain, and so on)	
SUGGESTED PRACTICES	APPLICATION DOCUMENTATION REQUIREMENTS
Varies based on habitat type	Map Photographs Recent plant inventory Conservation objectives Documentation of maintenance activities Project monitoring protocol Project monitoring results

Xerces Society Bee Better (Farm)

Website <https://beebettercertified.org/>

Application Cost	\$400 + labor and travel
On-Site Inspection Required	Yes
Third-Party Review Required	Yes
Renewal or Recertification Required	Yes
Educational Materials on Website	Yes
Signage Available	Yes
CERTIFICATION LOCATIONS	CERTIFICATION REQUIREMENTS
Farms	5% of certified acres are permanent habitat Three flowering species present during each season Nesting areas provided and protected SOP for tillage impact reduction Develop and implement pest/ disease scouting and monitoring program Eliminate unjustified use of pesticides No aerial application of pesticides (with exceptions) No pesticide use in permanent habitat areas No use of commercial bumblebees for open field pollination Maintain required records
SUGGESTED SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES	APPLICATION DOCUMENTATION REQUIREMENTS
NA	Farm plan Plant list record Map of parcels Planned pesticides for first year of certification Non-pesticide mitigation records Pest scouting and monitoring protocol Two years of pesticide use records

SUMMARY

There are a variety of national-level organizations with certification programs for wildlife habitat. Some of the programs are focused specifically on pollinator habitat, and others are focused on more general wildlife habitat. Each of the certification programs reviewed appear to incorporate current leading practices for building and maintaining native wildlife habitat in a sustainable fashion.

Although there are many similarities between the certification programs with regard to the needs of a habitat (forage/food, water, nesting areas), the programs that are intended for a corporation tend to have more extensive requirements than programs intended for individual/community sites. The corporate programs require written management plans for pests and/or vegetation, in addition to other documents. Programs intended for individual/community sites typically allow for self-reporting and have more suggestions than requirements for building and maintaining wildlife habitat. Of the nine certification programs reviewed, 56% require review or verification of documentation, and 33% a site visit. Only two programs require independent third-party verification with a site visit.

Certification programs have the potential to create value by encouraging individuals and corporations to undertake pollinator and other wildlife habitat conservation activities. The use of voluntary certification programs could be advantageous to companies evaluating when and how to report stewardship activities in support of ESG goals. Although document reviews and site visits do not guarantee that a specific ecological outcome will be achieved, they do verify that the conditions to achieve beneficial ecological outcomes have been developed and that management processes to maintain the conditions are in place. Voluntary certification programs with verification requirements protect against “greenwashing” claims by providing stronger assurances to stakeholders and the public that the certification is founded on current scientific research, has been implemented according to written plans, and is maintained in a way that provides continued benefits to wildlife.



APPENDIX: EXAMPLES OF STATE AND OTHER WILDLIFE HABITAT CERTIFICATIONS

State Programs

STATE	PROGRAM WEBSITE
Colorado	https://www.coloradowildlife.org/garden-habitat-certification/
Colorado, Wyoming, Utah	https://rockies.audubon.org/habitat-hero/apply
Florida	https://myfwc.com/viewing/habitat/certify/
Georgia	https://www.georgiaaudubon.org/wildlife-sanctuary-program.html https://gnps.org/habitat https://www.eealliance.org/pollinator-habitat-certification.html
Indiana	https://indianawildlife.org/take-action/backyard-habitat/
Kentucky	https://www.kwalliance.org/certified-backyard-habitats.html
Louisiana	https://lawildlifefed.org/certified-wildlife-habitat/ https://www.lnps.org/certifiedhabitat/
Maryland	https://www.mdsg.umd.edu/wra/programs/certified-wildlife-habitat-program
Mississippi	https://mswildlife.org/certified-wildlife-habitat/
Missouri	https://confedmo.org/certified-wildlife-habitat/
Montana	https://montanawildlife.org/habitat/garden-for-wildlife-certified-wildlife-habitats/
New Jersey	https://njaudubon.org/gardening-for-wildlife/
North Carolina	https://ncwf.org/our-work/garden-for-wildlife/certified-wildlife-habitat/
Pennsylvania	https://www.manada.org/native-plants/habitat-for-all/
South Carolina	https://www.scwf.org/habitat-landing-page
Tennessee	https://tnwf.org/garden-for-wildlife/
Texas	https://tpwd.texas.gov/huntwild/wild/wildlife_diversity/wildscapes/best_of_texas_certification.phtml
Vermont	https://vnrc.org/backyard-habitat/
Washington	https://wdfw.wa.gov/species-habitats/living/backyard

Regional or Local Programs

LOCATION	PROGRAM WEBSITE
Portland, Oregon	https://backyardhabitats.org/
Lake Oswego, Oregon	https://tryonfriends.org/backyard-habitat
Clark County, Oregon area	https://thewatershedalliance.org/portfolio/backyard-habitat-certification-program/
Pennsylvania, western	http://www.aswp.org/pages/backyard-habitat-program
Butte, Glenn, and Tehama Counties, California	https://www.altacal.org/neighborhood-habitat-program
City of Los Angeles	https://lacitysan.org/san/faces/home/portal/s-lsh-es/s-lsh-es-si/s-lsh-es-si-cwh?_afLoop=829340667765997&_afWindowMode=0&_afWindowId=null&_adf.ctrl-state=3zrt9qkv0_1
Oakland Conservation District, Michigan	http://www.oaklandconservationdistrict.org/backyard-habitat-course.html
Evanston, Illinois	http://greenerevanston.org/community-habitat-certification-program



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CONTACT INFORMATION

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EPRI RESOURCES

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Endangered and Protected Species

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