

PRESERVING POLLINATORS



Photos by CHRISTOPHER CHUNG / The Press Democrat

Austin Phillips, 14, left, and his brother Ethan, 12, both with Boy Scout Troop 63, spread a mixture of seeds on the ground Wednesday while planting a bee patch at Beltane Ranch in Glen Ellen.

Busy for the bees

'Bee patches' part of effort to combat die-off

By **DEREK MOORE**

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Alarm over the rapid and largely unexplained die-off of bee populations has prompted a North Bay organization to launch a pilot program aimed at reversing the disturbing trend.

"Bee patches" involve the simple act of growing clover, alfalfa and other buzz-friendly plants to nourish the critters and encourage pollination.

Organizers are working initially with Sonoma Valley grape growers who have open space suitable for planting one of the patches. They hope the program eventually becomes a national model for battling the beepocalypse, which

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A mixture of clover and alfalfa seeds is ready to be scattered to start a bee patch Wednesday at Beltane Ranch. The plants were chosen because they attract bees, nourishing them and encouraging pollination.

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BEES: No one knows the cause of colony collapse in U.S.

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in economic terms threatens the \$15 billion crop industry that relies on pollination.

A small group of Glen Ellen Boy Scouts seeded the first patch Wednesday at Beltane Ranch in Kenwood. Sweating in the warm morning sun, the boys used rakes to till the soil before they spread the seeds.

"The bees are not doing very well, so we're gonna help 'em," said 15-year-old Bodhi Morgan, a student at Summerfield Waldorf School in Santa Rosa. His dad, marine biologist Lance Morgan, pitched in, while his mother, Angela, observed.

Alexa Wood, whose family owns the Sonoma Highway ranch and vineyard estate, called the boys' efforts "good for them and beneficial to us." In addition to donating the site for planting the bee patch, Wood purchased the seeds from LeBallisters Seed Co. in Santa Rosa.

The bee program is being administered by the nonprofit North Coast Resource Conservation and Development Council, which received two grants totaling \$4,500 from the Patagonia company and

the Clif Bar Family Foundation.

Tish Ward, the council's southern Sonoma County representative, conceived of the bee patch idea and so far has gained commitments from several valley grape growers to donate land.

"To me, it doesn't matter if it's 10 feet by 10 feet, or 20 acres," she said.

No one seems to know for certain what is causing bee colonies to collapse in the United States, but it's believed to entail some combination of pesticides, lack of wild forage, parasites and disease. Honeybees have been a particular focus of concern, but wild bees, too, are suffering from the baffling threat.

Bee patches would serve the useful purpose of providing these prodigious pollinators with pesticide-free sources of nourishment. That's not so critical for the production of grapes used for wine, since grapes are self-pollinating.

But California's almond industry might take a keen interest in the program.

One acre of almond trees requires 2 colonies of honeybees to pollinate it. California has 700,000 acres in almond production, and only 600 honeybee colonies, accord-

ing to Kathy Kellison, a retired Santa Rosa educator and outreach coordinator for Partners for Sustainable Pollination.

Instead of having to bring in bees from around the country to pollinate almond trees, as is the current practice, they could be brought in from only hours away, after they happily over-winter in a Sonoma Valley vineyard.

"You have these vineyards that are basically dormant or not very active in the winter. This is exactly when we need placement for bees," said Kellison, who led a seminar at Beltane Ranch on June 29 for the Glen Ellen Scouts and other stakeholders, including U.S. Rep. Mike Thompson, D-St. Helena.

With any luck, by spring bees will be buzzing in the newly planted clover and alfalfa patch at Beltane, and at similar sites across Sonoma Valley.

"We're hoping we can spread it through our four-county area, but more than that, we'd like to see it spread across the United States," said Susan Warner, treasurer of the North Coast development council.

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