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HIVE ANXIETY: Both sides acknowledge record bee deaths but are in disagreement over the cause
Pesticide link to bee deaths pits farmers, beekeepers



By Debora Van Brenk, The London Free Press
Wednesday, October 30, 2013 11:30:55 EDT PM



QMI AGENCY FILE

This one is sure to sting.

Canada's pesticide watchdog, in its strongest statement yet on the subject, says honeybees continue to die in part because of a controversial coating used in most corn and soybean seeds.

Using neonicotinoid-treated corn and soybean seed is "not sustainable," the Pesticide Management Regulatory Agency says in a report that also challenges seed producers to come up with good reasons to keep using the insecticides after millions of bee deaths in Ontario, Quebec and Manitoba.

The agency's interim report adds fuel to an already hot debate that's also causing serious rifts among farmers, beekeepers, environmentalists and seed companies.

Some had thought that 2012 was an anomaly, with 42 beekeepers reporting major losses in 5,800 beehives during a hot and dry planting season.

But spring 2013 was a more typical planting season — and 74 apiarists reported more than 6,600 beehives affected, the report says.

"It's no surprise to beekeepers that their finding were about the same in 2013 as they were in 2012," said Dan Davidson, a Watford-area apiarist who is president of the Ontario Beekeepers Association.

"As soon as everyone puts two and two together — these are systemic insecticides and they enter flowering plants through the soil and water — that's the science that the grain farmers are looking for."

Beekeepers want a ban on the seed coatings in time for the 2014 planting season.

But farm lobbyists say the "fairly dramatic statements" in the report aren't backed by science.

"They are essentially demanding of the industry, proof of need," said Mark Wales, president of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture. "That takes a fair amount of research and you can't do that in one season."

The Pesticide Management Regulatory Agency is seeking response by mid-December but Wales wonders if the recommendations are foregone conclusions.

He said beekeepers and farmers agree the high bee mortality rates — as high as 90% in some places — aren't acceptable, either. But there are "divergent opinions" on the causes, he said.

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The issue

- Bees, colonies dying in great numbers, many reports of foraging bees missing from bee yards in Ontario, Quebec, Manitoba. Beekeepers correlate problem with spring planting of field crops
- The Pest Management Regulatory Agency, Health Canada's regulator, tested dead bees and found 75% had neonicotinoid residues.
- Neonicotinoids are added to seeds to cut insect damage to crops. Most corn and half soybean are treated.

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