

Pesticide linked to bee deaths to be restricted in Ontario

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Ontario intends to become the first province to restrict the use of a controversial pesticide linked to bee deaths, requiring farmers and other commercial growers to apply for permits to plant seeds treated with neonicotinoid insecticides.

The government wants to limit the blanket use of the seed treatment, while balancing the protection of insect pollinators with the needs of farmers to guard their crops and livelihoods against insects.

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The provincial agriculture ministry will soon begin holding meetings with farmers, beekeepers and pesticide makers with the goal of having a licensing system in place by the fall, when growers order seeds for next year.

"We are committed to working with stakeholders to develop a system that targets the use of neonicotinoid-treated seed only to areas or circumstances where there is demonstrated need," said Jeff Leal, Ontario's Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs.

"Our intention is to work with the industry to move away from the widespread, indiscriminate use of neonicotinoid-based pesticides," he said.

"Ideally, we would have a structure in place for the 2015 planting season – that is what we are working toward."

Neonicotinoids, – neonics for short – protect seeds and plants from worms and other crop-destroying insects, and have been blamed by several studies and Health Canada for the widespread collapse in colonies of honey bees, butterflies and other pollinators.

Bees are exposed to neonicotinoids in two ways: by eating the pollen, or by ingesting or carrying back to the hive the neonic-infused field dust kicked up by the tractor and planter. A University of Saskatchewan biologist found the chemicals in the province's streams, ditches and insects, and even

up the food chain in birds. To reduce the dust, neonic suppliers such as Bayer AG and Syngenta have begun supplying the seeds with a wax-based lubricant, under the direction of Health Canada. But the lubricant, combined with modified planting machines, reduces dust by only 20 per cent.

The use of neonicotinoids has been banned temporarily in Europe, but are unregulated in Canada and the United States. Ontario does not have the power to ban pesticides, which are regulated by Health Canada, but the province can control or ban their sale.

The connection between bee deaths and the pesticides is murky. Some studies point to parasitic mites and viruses as the more likely causes of bee deaths, in addition to winter starvation and loss of habitat. Some say insects do not absorb lethal doses of the insecticide through pollen, though beekeepers and others maintain even small amounts can weaken bees and make them susceptible to other maladies. However, beekeepers in Western Canada have not seen their colonies collapse, even though their hives feed on the flowers of canola, a crop that is treated with neonicotinoids.

Most of the bee deaths have been concentrated in Ontario, a province with the warm summers best suited to growing corn, a grain used in biofuels and animal feed. Ontario grows more than 60 per cent of the country's corn, and corn is thought to be most closely linked to the province's bee deaths. The irregular shape and size of the seeds, combined with the compressed-air planters, make the planting process quite dusty.

Beekeepers in Ontario say their winter losses have risen to as high as 50 per cent from 15 per cent before neonicotinoids became popular, and many want the pesticide banned. However, that view is not shared by all beekeepers in the province, nor the Canadian Honey Council, which represents 7,000 apiarists across the country.

Rod Scarlett, executive director of the group said he welcomes a reduction in the use of neonicotinoids. But he doubts the effectiveness of a licensing system because farmers and government officials might not know at the beginning of the season where the pesticide is or isn't needed.

"We want to ensure farmers don't suffer," Mr. Scarlett said in an interview from his office near Edmonton.

Growers of flowers, fruits and vegetables are also heavy users of the insecticide. Neonicotinoid proponents note the chemical is not absorbed by humans, and it is much more effective, cheaper and safer than the older insecticides it replaced.

"Even the crop protection companies will tell you neonics kills bees. They are designed to be an insecticide," Mr. Scarlett said. "The bigger question in the mind of the Canadian Honey Council is, what's next? How do we mitigate the risk? If that product isn't available for farmers to use, do they go back to organophosphates, which are far worse for mammals and insects?"

Ontario is home to about 3,000 of the country's 7,000 beekeepers. Most beekeepers know to keep their bees away from corn fields during planting. But given the prevalence of the crop, and the high density of Ontario's farmland, this is often not possible, Mr. Scarlett said.

Ontario has taken other steps to support the honey industry, providing \$105 per hive to those who lose 40 per cent of their bees, and committing \$1.2-million to research on pollinator health and farming methods.

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