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Don't blame loss of bees on pesticides

Baltimore Sun

March 17, 2015

Debate over honey bees has taken a sour turn.

Nobody here is diminishing the importance of honey bees. The bees are in trouble, but neonicotinoids are not the problem ("[No bees? No food](#)," March 5). Sen. Shirley Nathan-Pulliam writes in her recent commentary "that bee hive losses are greater than 30 percent since 2006." I'm not sure where this number comes from, but I present the following facts. The decline of bee hive colonies in the U.S. started in 1950 dropping from over 5.5 million active hives to 2.4 million bee hives in 2006. Contrary to media hype (and according to the [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#)), since 2006 the bee colony "population" has risen to over 2.64 million bee hives nationwide. Also, the claim that "Maryland experienced 50 percent bee loss" is misleading at best. A Maryland Department of Agriculture registration report released in 2015 shows a 49 percent increase in the amount of beekeepers and a 47 percent increase in bee colonies from 2008 through 2014.

The most harmful elements to hive health are the Varroa mite, Nosema fungus, lack of forage, hive mismanagement practices, improper nutrition and, in the back of the pack, chemical toxicity. In the entire state of Maryland, there are zero confirmed cases of bee deaths from neonicotinoids!

Any pest control product, when applied outside of label, can be highly toxic to bees. Here are just a few "organic pesticides" that are highly toxic to bees when

applied improperly: Insecticidal soap, horticultural oil, pyrethrins, even the copper sulfate fungicide that my mom used on our roses! It is illegal to apply a pesticide not according to the labeled directions, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has already updated its labeling requirements to further protect pollinators. You see the issue I have here is that a few isolated bad players applying products improperly has gotten us to this point.

Brent Rutley, Woodbine

The writer is president of Just This Side of Paradise Tree Farm and the Maryland Nursery, Landscape and Greenhouse Association.



No bees? No food.

By Shirley Nathan-Pulliam

Baltimore Sun

March 5, 2015

Why is the Md. legislature protecting the desires of golfers instead of the food supply?

The honey bees are in trouble. Since 2006, beekeepers have reported average hive losses of 30 percent or higher each year. In 2012, Maryland beekeepers lost nearly 50 percent of their hives.

This is a huge problem. It is not hyperbole to say that without bees, we will run out of food. Honey bees and other pollinators are responsible for one of out of every three bites of food we eat. Bees pollinate nearly three-quarters of the 100 crops that make up 90 percent of the world's food supply. Apples, blueberries, strawberries, carrots and broccoli all rely on bees. Almonds rely on bees. The

coffee you rely on every morning? Growing the beans to make it depends on bees.

Why are the bees dying?

Researchers, farmers, beekeepers and others agree that the problem is related to a set of pesticides called neonicotinoids (or neonics). Studies show that neonics contribute to honey bee deaths, as well as to declines in native pollinators, birds and aquatic life. In addition to killing bees outright, research shows that even low levels of these toxic pesticides impair bees' ability to learn, find their way back to the hive, collect food, produce new queens and fight off illness. These science-based concerns are why The [European Union](#) has banned the most widely used neonics and the U.S. Fish and Wild Life Service will discontinue their use in wildlife refuges by 2016.

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Still, neonics are the fastest growing and most heavily used class of insecticides. The neonicotinoid market is now 25 percent of the overall pesticide market, with annual sales of more than \$2 billion in 2013.

Neonics are big business. And they're killing the bees.

That's why a coalition of many different groups of people — beekeepers, public health advocates, environmental organizations, farmers and others — all are in favor of a bi-partisan bill we sponsored, Senate Bill 163/House Bill 605 — the Pollinator Protection Act.

The act is designed to protect our honey bees from the harmful effects of neonics by requiring that any plants, seeds or nursery stock treated with neonicotinoid pesticides include a warning label. And it would ensure that consumers couldn't purchase them. Instead, neonicotinoid pesticides would be available for sale only to certified applicators, farmers or veterinarians.

Restricting the use of neonics would go a long way toward saving the bees. It would also help protect Maryland's crabs — another summertime staple — as high levels of neonics have been shown to be toxic to aquatic life. Some say the pesticides even are a danger to humans.

Opponents of the bill say it's unclear that the pesticides are causing the problem. A ban on neonicotinoids, they say, would be harmful to those who need them to do their work, such as landscapers, horticulturalists and golf course superintendents.

But a statewide poll conducted earlier this year found that nearly 80 percent of Maryland voters are extremely concerned about even the possible impact of pesticides on their health. And in a recent OpinionWorks poll of 562 randomly selected Maryland registered voters, 81 percent of voters supported the proposal to label nursery plants and 78 percent favored restricting consumer use of this type of pesticides.

In other words, Marylanders understand that saving the bees — and our food — is crucial. Even major nurseries and big box stores are taking steps to eliminate neonic use. Nurseries such as Behnke's and Cavano's Perennials have stopped using the toxins. [Home Depot](#) now requires its suppliers to label all plants treated with neonicotinoid pesticides.

With support coming from so many corners — businesses, farmers, beekeepers, Maryland's voters — how is it that the Pollinator Protection Act is losing ground?

Here in Annapolis, it's easy to get a sense about which way the wind is blowing on a certain bill. And despite the research, the support from voters and from businesses and the real threats to our very livelihood, it seems that the concerns of the golfers are buzzing louder than the concerns of the beekeepers.

Our grandmothers used to tell us "You catch more flies with honey than vinegar" — a nudging to be kind, even when we don't always feel like it.

But the fact is, the alarming rate of honey bee losses is unsustainable. We're running out of honey, we're running out of bees, and we're running out of time.

We've tried being kind. But we're starting to get angry. And you should too.

Tell your elected official to pass the Pollinator Protection Act today.

Shirley Nathan-Pulliam is a Maryland state senator representing District 44 in Baltimore city and county. Her email is ishirley.nathan.pulliam@senate.state.md.us.