

Are bee colonies collapsing? If so, why? If not, why all the hype?

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Last June, in response to ongoing concerns about the perceived loss of bee colonies, often referred to as “bee colony collapse disorder (BCCD),” President Obama established a multi-agency “Pollinator Task Force.” The panel’s mandate: investigate the various data on the health of bees in the U.S., and if a valid threat was detected, to determine the cause or causes and make recommendations as to how best to deal with them. Indeed, over the course of the past year or so, the concept of catastrophic, agriculture-threatening loss of bee colonies has been [largely debunked](#).

The panel’s report came out a few months late, 2 weeks ago in fact, and [its conclusions were](#), well, not so conclusive: While not indicting any particular exposure as key in declining bee colonies, the task force outlined a series of steps and goals for agencies to pursue, such as tackling bee-killing pathogens and mites, reducing pesticide use, restoring degraded pollinator habitats, and encouraging the planting of more flowering plants and other pollinator-friendly vegetation.

In his recent *Science 2.0* column, ACSH friend Hank Campbell (who runs that site) had his own perspectives on “problem with bees” and the contributions of the pollinator task

force's methodologies and [recommendations](#). His overall grade was "a solid B," although some parts of the report were not up to snuff: his assessment of the panel's recommendation to "reduce honey bee colony losses during winter to no more than 15% within 10 years" was met with a "let's pass a law to make the sun rise earlier"-type of comment: "We can't control winter, and summer numbers are a better indicator of any unnatural causes, not winter ones. Grade: C-."

He wisely disposes of the "environmentalist" mythology which has sprouted and grown in the greeniac fringe (rising and falling inversely with bee populations, it seems) alleging that a perfectly safe and effective class of pesticides, *neonicotinoids*, has a key role in the ostensible downfall of bees, with a back-of-the-hand dismissal: "Environmentalists have created a magic bullet in a class of modern pesticides called neonicotinoids and have been lobbying for bans but Australia had no colony collapses despite heavy use of these "neonics" and shifting geography of losses in Europe and the U.S. means banning something won't help. Scientists recognize that systemic tools like neonics are better for the environment than broad applications."

Although there is no evidence to support the "pesticide hypothesis" and plenty of observational evidence that those crop-protecting chemicals are not causal in reducing bee health, these inconvenient facts did not dissuade the EPA from using the Pollinator Panel report as an excuse to [restrict pesticide usage](#) around areas where bee activity is expected, albeit thankfully for a limited periods of time.

ACSH's Dr. Gil Ross had this comment: "We have weighed in on this topic — BCCD and its possible causes, assuming the concept is real at all — on numerous occasions: [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#) are examples. Without being redundant, let me summarize: BCCD was vastly exaggerated by agenda-driven groups opposed to pesticides (and all chemicals, for that matter) and they targeted neonics as 'the cause.' Well, it turns out that bees come and go with the seasons, as always, and any unusual decline in their populations has been more likely attributed to infestations with e.g. varroa mites and the viruses they attract. Neonics are particularly safe and were, way back when, admired as such even by enviros. But, analogous to the situation with natural gas and fractavists, the chemophobes decided to let agenda and ideology trump science and economics to target this class of pesticides. The truth seems to have largely won out. This time."