

Federal politicians criticized for 'regurgitating' pesticide industry lines

By [Riley Sparks](#) in [News](#), [Politics](#) | April 5th 2017



Research suggests a link between widespread use of the pesticide imidacloprid and the disappearance of honeybees around the world. File photo by the Associated Press

Environmental groups are accusing a House of Commons committee of political interference in a science-based Health Canada proposal to ban the widely-used pesticide imidacloprid.

Imidacloprid is part of a class of pesticides call neonicotinoids. Health Canada's Pest Management Regulatory Agency (PMRA) said last year that the pesticide should be phased out

over three to five years because it can kill aquatic insects, which research suggests could wreck food chains and destabilize whole ecosystems. Research also suggests a link between widespread use of neonicotinoids and [the disappearance of honeybees around the world](#).

Pesticide manufacturers have questioned the data behind the proposed ban and argued that there's no effective, economical replacement for imidacloprid.

The House of Commons Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food held two days of hearings on the ban, inviting testimony from two major pesticide manufacturers and an industry lobby group, as well as farming lobby groups and representatives of Équiterre and the David Suzuki Foundation.

Scientists at the PMRA are tasked with making the final decision on imidacloprid, but the Commons committee chairman, saying he was speaking on behalf of the committee, weighed in on the ban during a 90-day public consultation period, which ended on March 23.

In [a letter](#) to Health Minister Jane Philpott sent on March 23 and published last week, Pat Finnigan, Liberal MP and committee chair, repeated concerns raised by industry representatives that the PMRA's process was too short, not transparent and ignored data that could support the continued use of imidacloprid.

The David Suzuki Foundation and other environmental groups say the committee is parroting industry lines while ignoring their concerns about imidacloprid and other neonicotinoids.

"It does look very much like the chemical companies that manufacture these pesticides have the ear of the committee," said Lisa Gue, neonicotinoids spokesperson for the David Suzuki Foundation.

In the letter, Finnigan wrote that "the loss of the pesticide imidacloprid remains a great concern for the agriculture sector." Alternatives do exist, but he questioned whether they are economically viable. "Farmers and pesticide registrants are afraid that discontinuing imidacloprid would force farmers to use greater quantities of ineffective pesticides," he wrote.

"Concerns have been raised about the lack of transparency of PMRA's re-evaluation process," Finnigan said, adding that industry witnesses said they felt the pest management regulators had not given them the opportunity to provide their own data in response to the proposed ban.

Finnigan also noted that pesticide manufacturers complained that the re-evaluation was based on lab data, not real-world levels of pesticides in the environment.

Representatives of the PMRA spoke at the committee to explain the scientific basis for the ban and answered questions about their use of laboratory data – which they said is standard – but the letter makes no mention of that testimony.

Gue, who testified at the Commons committee in March, said it was "very unusual to see Parliamentarians wading into agency decision making in this way." She said she couldn't think

of another time when the committee has taken such a close interest in a Health Canada re-evaluation of a specific chemical, noting that the PMRA extended the deadline at the request of the House committee.

Politicians used by multinational, says John Bennett

Finnigan, the committee chair, previously told *National Observer* that the committee had asked for the extension after getting “pushback” from the pesticide industry, who felt the PMRA hadn’t listened to their concerns. He didn’t immediately respond to a request for comment.

“The committee should be ashamed of letting itself be used by a multinational,” John Bennett, Friends of the Earth senior policy advisor, said in an email. “One 10-minute presentation” by the two environmental groups did not justify the committee’s assertion that it heard a wide variety of perspectives, Bennett said.

Prevent Cancer Now chair Meg Sears said the organization, which submitted a brief in favour of the ban, was “puzzled” by the committee’s response. Imidacloprid was temporarily registered in 1995, she noted. That should have given industry plenty of time to provide the federal government with enough data to prove the pesticide is safe, she said.

Muhannad Malas, toxics program manager with Environmental Defence, said that he hoped the “one-sided” letter wouldn’t interfere with the PMRA’s mandate to make science-based decisions. “The PMRA is supposed to look at specific issues like risks from pesticides in an objective way. Political interests should not be interfering in these decisions,” Malas said.

“The science basis for the proposed decision is very clear and solid,” said Gue, from the David Suzuki Foundation. “There’s no justifiable reason for the PMRA to change course at this point.”

In the draft ban, the agency concluded that “based on currently available information, the continued high volume use of imidacloprid in agricultural areas is not sustainable,” because of the risk it appears to pose to aquatic insects.

Scott Kirby, director general for the PMRA’s environmental assessment directorate, told the committee in March that the onus is on industry to prove the chemical is safe, and so far, that has not been done. “I absolutely feel and believe that there is evidence out there that there are risks of concern,” Kirby said in [his testimony](#).

Europe headed for full ban on neonicotinoids, reported *The Guardian*

The European Union issued a temporary ban on the use of imidacloprid and two other neonicotinoids on flowering crops in 2013 because of concerns about their effect on bees and other pollinators. The EU now appears headed to a full ban on neonicotinoids, [The Guardian reported](#) last month.

Ontario and Quebec have also introduced plans to reduce the use of neonicotinoids, and Montreal and Vancouver have banned imidacloprid.

Health Canada's proposed ban focused on the pesticide's effect on aquatic insects and mammals, but a second Health Canada investigation is looking into the effect of neonicotinoids on bees and other pollinators.

"The world is moving in this direction, so it's perplexing that Canada's agriculture committee is advocating foot-dragging," Gue said.

She said it was time for Canada to do a comprehensive review of neonicotinoids, so regulators don't get caught up in an "endless game of whack-a-mole" as pesticide users switch from one chemical to another.