



Beekeeper Speaks Out Against Anti-Pesticide Campaigns -- Lee Townsend

by [ANGELA LOGOMASINI](#) on MARCH 20, 2014

openmarket.org

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Anyone worried about honey bee survival should read the piece by Canadian beekeeper Lee Townsend in the Guelph Mercury newspaper. In recent years, beekeepers have seen some of their hives disappear without much explanation, a phenomenon referred to as "colony collapse disorder."

Green activists have used this situation to randomly initiate bans on various pesticide products in the name of saving the bees, and their latest target is a class of chemicals called neonicotinoids. But we can't help the bees if we continue to address the wrong causes. As Townsend points out, honey bees do just fine in many places where neonicotinoids are used, such as Canada. This suggests that neonicotinoids are the wrong target. Not only will bans divert our focus from finding the real cause or causes of colony collapse disorder, it will harm the ability of farmers to produce food. Reading Townsend's entire article on this topic is highly recommended, but here are some highlights that you shouldn't miss:

No, the newest and most preventable threat comes from the mistaken alliance some beekeepers are forming with environmental activist groups who would turn farmers into enemies and drive a wedge between the farming and beekeeping communities that depend on each other for their livelihoods. ...

Unfortunately, we [public officials and bee keepers] haven't been able to work together to find out what is really happening, in part due to the insertion of special interest groups like the Sierra Club. There is no denying that neonics, like any other pesticide, can be toxic to honeybees if misapplied. But these special interest groups have scared beekeepers, the public, and the media into believing these products are far worse than actual scientific data indicates. ...

In addition, these special interest groups fail to acknowledge there are colonies in Ontario and Quebec that are exposed to neonics on both corn and soy, with zero problems. And look at Western Canada. On the Prairies, 70 per cent of Canada's colonies forage canola without issue. We are even exposed to corn and soy, and except for four beekeepers in Manitoba in 2013, there have been no issues there either.

Clearly there is need for further research, including the health status of these colonies prior to neonic exposure and clear records of the management practices of beekeepers. Most non-beekeepers don't realize that just as farmers use pesticides to keep pests off their crops, beekeepers use pesticides inside the hive to control for infestations such as varroa mites. There is nothing wrong with this, if it is done properly. But beekeepers should keep this in mind when they link arms with activist groups with a larger anti-pesticide agenda.