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CropLife calls nurse, doctor neonic push misleading

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Brain development | Nurses' organization says public can't wait for definitive evidence and wants herbicide moratorium

CropLife Canada says nurses and doctors in Ontario are “blatantly misleading the public” when it comes to the safety of neonicotinoids.

The Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment (CAPE) and the Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario (RNAO) issued a statement last week claiming that neonicotinoid insecticides may cause brain damage in children.

The groups want the Ontario government to ban the controversial neonicotinoid class of insecticides, which are applied as coatings to nearly every corn and canola seed and some of the soybeans in North America.

Pierre Petelle, CropLife vice-president of chemistry, said linking neonics to childhood brain development is preposterous.

“This is a ridiculous allegation, coming from a known anti-ag activist group,” he said.

“Despite its name, the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment is nothing more than an environmental activist group that anyone can join simply by paying for a membership.”

Doris Grinspun, chief executive officer of RNAO, said the campaign is necessary because neonic insecticides may be compromising children’s brain development. She said there is no scientific proof that neonicotinoids cause brain damage, but nurses, doctors and society can’t wait for definitive evidence.

“We are saying you cannot wait until there is conclusive evidence that they actually cause complete damage of the brains of our children,” she said.

“Until there is no proof that it doesn’t (cause) damage ... then we are saying hold it. We are asking at a minimum to start with a moratorium.”

The RNAO and CAPE have teamed up with the David Suzuki Foundation and Ontario Nature to buy ads on Toronto’s subway system. They show a sad boy looking at a dead bee and the caption reads: “Doctors and nurses say neonic pesticides hurt our bees and us.”

Barry Senft, chief executive officer of Grain Farmers of Ontario, said it is alarmist for medical professionals to make unfounded claims about neonics.

“To come out with these kind of statements about children’s health ... this is just irresponsible,” he said.

“This is just a money raising campaign for some of those special interest groups.” Neonicotinoid seed treatments have also attracted attention lately with some scientists calling them a threat to pollinators, such as bees.

As well, a European Food Safety Authority report issued a scientific opinion last fall on the human health risks of neonicotinoids. The panel looked at published studies to evaluate the developmental neurotoxicity of two neonics: acetamiprid and imidacloprid.

The scientists concluded “both compounds may affect neuronal development and function, although several methodological limitations have been identified.”

Petelle said the EFSA opinion isn't valid.

“The EFSA panel findings are irrelevant to real-world use conditions for this product,” said Petelle, who cited qualifiers in the report.

“The EFSA also said: ‘Acute and chronic consumer exposure assessments have been conducted following current WHO (World Health Organization) methodologies and no risk for the consumer is expected resulting from the use of imidacloprid according to the representative uses.’ ”

However, Petelle said no international regulatory body has adjusted its scientific findings to account for the report.

The European Food Safety Authority opinion on neonics and human health can be found at www.efsa.europa.eu/en/efsajournal/pub/3471.htm.