



Another View: Evidence is questionable that pesticide is harming honeybees

By Randy Oliver
Special to The Bee

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I commend The Bee for promoting environmental awareness (“ A lot is riding on finding culprit in honeybee deaths”; Editorials, July 27). However, contrary to popular myth, honeybees are actually in no danger of extinction. In fact, the number of managed bee hives has been increasing in the U.S. and nearly every country in the world. The reality is that the number of hives goes up and down depending upon the laws of supply and demand.

My sons and I make our livings as commercial beekeepers, and we are acutely aware of the adverse effects of pesticides upon bees. But the truth is that although pesticides have always been an issue to pollinators and wildlife, the main problems that honeybees have to deal with are the viruses transmitted by the bloodsucking varroa mite, which was introduced about 1990, and loss of good forage habitat. Pesticides, although they get a great deal of public attention, are down the list of overall bee problems.

I came of age shortly after the publication of “Silent Spring” and have been a lifelong environmental activist and organic gardener. When I first heard of the neonicotinoid insecticides, my first thought was: “Oh, here we go again, another DDT.” But here’s where I differ from some activists – I’m also a biologist, and I do my homework. I read every scientific paper on neonics in full, down to the supplementary material, and often correspond with the authors. I visit beekeepers worldwide, speak with those who have had pesticide issues and go over lab analyses and pesticide use reports.

Courtesy of Randy Oliver

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organochlorines and organophosphates – and is working to phase out the remainder. Of course, no insecticide is harmless, but some, including the neonics, are rightfully considered to be of “reduced risk” to man and the environment.

That’s not to say that neonics are harmless. There are specific issues of which the California Department of Pesticide Regulation and EPA are well aware, and these are being resolved, although I’m unsatisfied with the EPA’s latest “bee protection” restrictions for insecticides applied to crops in bloom. Our current agricultural system applies pesticides far too freely and unnecessarily. But the calls for the banning neonics are based purely upon speculation, not good science. Neonics are not as persistent as DDT, nor is there any compelling evidence that they are any more harmful than other insecticides currently in use. The focus on neonics distracts us from more serious environmental issues.

The real problem is that our agricultural system has shifted from small farms to large growers – 80 percent of farm sales come from only 8 percent of farms in the U.S. And those large farms are so efficient that they leave no room for the natural vegetation that can support wildlife and pollinators. In short, our main environmental concern should be the extinction of species due to habitat conversion to agriculture.

The main cause of extinction is habitat loss. There are 200,000 additional human mouths to feed every day. The only ways out of this fix are to either reduce the human population (politically unpopular), convert more natural habitat to monocultures (and drive more species to extinction) or to farm existing land more intensively (which, until we adopt better agro-ecological practices, includes the use of pesticides). That’s a sorry list of choices.

If one really wishes to help bees, other pollinators and wildlife, support land conservation (via land trusts, the Nature Conservancy, the Conservation Reserve Program), tie farm subsidies to more environmentally friendly land management (as is being done in Europe) and put livestock back on pasture. There are many win-win solutions for farmers, consumers and the environment. But circumventing the EPA by demanding the banning of a single insecticide on questionable evidence is not one of them.

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