



Industry group warns pesticide ban would 'handcuff' farmers

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Amid mounting public concern over the link between pesticides and the decline of insect pollinators, the industry group that represents the makers of the chemicals says restricting use of the crop protection would “handcuff” farmers in their battle against insects.

The Ontario government’s proposal to end the blanket use of a class of pesticide known as neonicotinoid by requiring growers to seek a licence to apply it would create two tiers of farmers, and hamper one of the province’s key economic sectors, said Pierre Petelle of industry group CropLife Canada, which represents Bayer AG, Syngenta AG and other makers of pesticides.



Neonicotinoids have been linked to widespread decline in bees and other insects that pollinate one third of the food we eat.

Neonics, used on soybean, canola, flowers and vegetables, are banned in Europe. Health Canada is reassessing its approval of the chemicals, which it has blamed for bee deaths associated with corn planting in Ontario and Quebec. Researchers say exposure to neonic-laden dust is lethal to bees, and that exposure to the tainted pollen weakens the colonies by impairing their abilities to forage.

The toxins worsen the effects of parasites, viruses and long winters, all of which have contributed to the 25-per-cent loss of Canadian honeybee colonies in the past winter. The Ontario government says just 10 to 20 per cent of planted corn acreage requires neonic crop protection, but its use is much more widespread.

The government is in talks with the honey, agriculture and chemical industries as it moves toward implementing a licensing system, possibly in time for the 2015 growing season. The move is hotly opposed by chemical companies and the province's 28,000 grain farmers, who grow corn and soybeans worth \$3-billion each year.

"Agriculture is a multibillion-dollar industry in Ontario," Mr. Petelle said. "It varies between number one and number two in terms of GDP [with] the auto sector. It is an economic engine on Ontario, and when we see governments talking about getting involved in decision-making that farmers make on a daily basis, that is a concern."

"Our main concern is that the government doesn't add an unnecessary layer of bureaucracy and install a system that picks winners and losers in terms of which farmers can use technology and which can't," Mr. Petelle said.

Mr. Petelle would not say how much revenue the chemical companies make from selling neonic-treated seeds to Ontario growers. Bayer, the dominant pesticide seller in Canada, said second-quarter sales in its global agriculture division were €2.47-billion (\$3.62-billion), led by double-digit sales increases in North and South America.

The chemicals, which are generally applied to the seeds before planting, become present in all parts of the plant, including the pollen and nectar bees and other pollinators rely on for protein. Neonics are water soluble, and have been found in streams and wetlands in farming areas. A study released last week by the U.S. Geological Survey found the chemicals are present in streams throughout the U.S. Midwest. Other studies have shown neonics reduce populations of bird and insects.

The chemical companies say neonics are not harmful to bees if used properly, and they say there is no evidence bees are in trouble.

"The decline in pollinators – that very statement is a problem to begin with," Mr. Petelle said. "There are isolated issues with acute deaths, but in terms of decline, pollinator numbers are on

the increase. In Canada and even regionally in Ontario and Quebec, there's never been more bee colonies."

But according to the Canadian Association of Professional Apiculturists, the number of honey bee colonies in Canada fell to 678,000 in 2013 from 720,000 in 2012. Wintering deaths ranged from a high of 58 per cent in Ontario to a low of 15 per cent in B.C. (Fifteen per cent is considered normal, the group said.)

CAPA said the number of honeybee colonies rose by 108,000 between 2009 and 2012, a rise chemical companies point to as evidence neonics are safe. But some beekeepers say the colonies increased in number because they were forced to split hives in order to make up for the deaths. The result is more hives, but fewer bees.

"If colony numbers are not declining it is because beekeepers split their colonies, and because packages of bees are imported to Canada every year to make up for some of the losses," said Professor Ernesto Guzman, head of the Honey Bee Research Centre at Ontario's University of Guelph. "If no bees were imported and if beekeepers did not split their colonies, by now, there would be very few colonies if any in Canada."

Imports of honeybees, not including queens, tripled in dollar value and volume between 2008 and 2012, according to Statistics Canada.

Health Canada, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the California Department of Pesticide Regulation are working together to study the safety of neonics, and have issued a new call for the chemical companies to submit studies that support the continued sale of neonicotinoids. The Alberta Beekeepers Commission recently announced it was conducting a four-year study of honeybees across Canada, funded by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.

Scott Kirby, a director at Health Canada's Pest Management Regulatory Agency, said an interim report on neonics' reassessment is due next year, and a final statement should be published in 2016 or 2017.

"If there were some pivotal piece of information that indicated an immediate, unacceptable risk then we might consider regulatory action but at this stage based on the scientific information that we've seen, there's no indication that an immediate ban on these products is necessary," said Mr. Kirby, who said the federal government has no plans to follow Ontario's lead in implementing a licensing system.

"We totally support the idea of only using a pesticide when there is a need to ... but the folks in the provincial departments of agriculture are better equipped to make that determination because they have folks on the ground that work with farmers on [pest management] so our agency would not be in a position to assess if pest pressure is a problem," he said. "It's an approach that is better implemented at a provincial level."

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