

Public concern grows over use of pesticide linked to bee deaths

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As the Ontario government eyes restricting the use of an agricultural pesticide blamed for the deaths of bees and other pollinators, there are new signs the public is worried about the widespread use of neonicotinoid insecticides.

A new poll shows 87 per cent of Ontarians surveyed are concerned about the threat neonicotinoids pose to insects and wildlife, and 92 per cent want the government to protect pollinators.

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The poll of 1,000 people was conducted by Oracle Poll Research for the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment, David Suzuki Foundation and Ontario Nature – environmental groups that want the federal government to follow Europe's move and ban neonicotinoids. Currently, they are used to grow everything from corn and canola to vegetables and flowers.

"I've been doing environmental work since 1984 and I've never seen this level of public concern about an issue," said Gideon Forman, executive director of Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment, which paid for two-thirds of the poll.

Among the survey's respondents, 77 per cent said the government should place a two-year moratorium on neonics. As well, 72 per cent were concerned about neonics contaminating soil and groundwater.

"I think there's a general concern about pesticides, and we know that from other polling we've done," Mr. Forman said in an interview.

"People used to see them sprayed right in their neighbourhoods so there's a heightened awareness about that. And then when you connect that to bees, which people understand are so crucial to the food supply, I think you put together two very volatile things: pesticides and food supply, and people get very concerned."

Jeff Leal, Ontario's Agriculture Minister, has said the government wants to implement a system that ends the blanket applications of the chemicals and restricts their use to areas prone to pests. While all Ontario corn acreage is treated with neonics, the provincial government says only a fraction requires it.

The proposal to restrict neonics has angered farmers, who say the seed treatments are vital to guarding against worms and other hungry insects. They say the treatments are safer for people, wildlife and the environment than the sprays they replaced. The chemical companies that sell the neonic-treated seeds say pollinators do not ingest enough of the pesticides for it to have ill effects on their health.

But a growing body of science suggests the neonics are contributing to the declining population of bees, which are said to pollinate one third of our food supply. Beekeepers say the toxins worsen the lethal effects of mites, viruses and wintering starvation, all of which are serious threats to honeybee colonies.

In Ontario, beekeepers lost 58 per cent of their colonies over the past winter. The national average loss was 25 per cent, well above the normal winter-loss of 15 per cent, said the Canadian Association of Professional Apiculturists, which conducted the survey.

Home Depot has responded to consumer concerns by saying it will begin labelling flowers that contain neonics. Other garden centres have said they are looking at the issue but are not ready to take steps to advise customers if the flowers and plants they sell could expose pollinators to the chemicals.

Health Canada, which regulates pesticides, is reassessing its approval of neonics after its Pest Management Regulatory Agency blamed bee deaths in Ontario and Quebec with the planting of neonic-treated corn. The federal government is not expected to issue a new report on the chemicals' approval until 2016 or 2017.

In the meantime, Health Canada three weeks ago approved for use two new pesticides that contain neonics, a move critics say should not have happened while the reassessment is underway.

"It's like they are talking out of both sides of their mouths," Mr. Forman said. "On the one hand they recognize that neonics are a big concern, and yet they are going ahead and registering more of them."

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