

## Beekeepers file lawsuit against pesticide makers over bee deaths

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Beekeepers have launched a class-action lawsuit in Ontario against two chemical companies that make agricultural pesticides linked to the widespread deaths of honeybees.

The honey makers allege Syngenta and Bayer CropScience were “negligent” in the “design, sale manufacture and distribution” of neonicotinoid pesticides, which are used to grow corn, soybeans and many other crops.

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The lawsuit, which seeks \$450-million in damages, alleges beekeepers experienced damaged or lost bee colonies, decreased honey production, lost profits and unrecoverable costs as a result of neonic use on plants and crops.

The claims have not been tested in court. Representatives of the chemical companies have told The Globe and Mail that honeybees do not absorb enough neonics in the field to suffer ill effects. They say the pesticides are safe if used as directed.

Syngenta and Bayer did not respond to interview requests on Wednesday morning.

The named plaintiffs are southwestern Ontario honey makers Sun Parlor and Munro Honey, both of which are family-owned businesses that have operated for about a century.

In the statement of claim, both companies allege they respectively lost more than \$2-million in bees and honey production because of neonics between 2006 and 2013, when the pesticides became widely used in Canada.

Dimitri Laskaris, a lawyer with the firm representing the plaintiffs, said in an interview he has been retained by many beekeepers in Ontario representing the majority of the country's honeybee industry.

“It's not surprising to us there is so much interest in this,” said Mr. Laskaris of Siskinds LLP.

Neonics are systemic pesticides that farmers use to protect their crops against insects. The pesticides are temporarily banned in Europe, and their approval is being reassessed by Health Canada. The Ontario government says it plans to regulate the use of neonics, which have been cited as contributing to the 58-per-cent bee mortality rate in Ontario over the past winter.

Health Canada has blamed the planting of corn in Ontario for honeybee deaths, and directed farmers and chemical companies to take steps to reduce the amount of pesticide-laden dust that is kicked up during seeding.

Honeybees are the most important pollinators, responsible for one-third of the food we eat. This amounts to \$1.5-billion worth of food in Canada every year, and \$150-billion globally, according to honeybee researchers at the University of Guelph.

Over the past six years, honeybee losses in Canada have averaged 30 per cent annually. Causes for the decline include pesticides, parasitic mites, viruses, cold winters and the stresses placed on colonies when they are moved among farms. Scientists and bee experts believe neonics weaken the bees and make them more vulnerable to the pathogens.

The Canadian Association of Professional Apiculturists, which tracks bee mortality rates, says normal winter losses are 15 per

cent.

The Ontario Beekeepers' Association, which supports the Ontario government plan to limit use of neonics, said it was not involved in the court action against the chemical companies, but welcomes the chance for beekeepers to recover losses they have suffered.

"This action puts the blame where it belongs - on the pesticide manufacturers," said Tibor Szabo, an OBA member who breeds queen bees.

Mr. Laskaris said he will seek Canada-wide certification for the lawsuit, a process that can take more than a year.

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