

Ont. watchdog wants province to act on pesticides linked to bee deaths

Neonicotinoids persistent in soil, water and highly mobile within ecosystems

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Ontario's environmental watchdog is recommending the province act on its own to restrict the use of neonicotinoid pesticides in 2015 if a federal initiative now under way proves ineffective.

Environmental Commissioner Gord Miller says there is abundant evidence linking declines in honey bee populations to use of the chemicals to treat seeds for corn, soybeans and similar crops.

- [SPECIAL REPORT | Bee researchers raise more warning flags about neonicotinoid pesticides](#)
- [What's killing Canadian honeybees?](#)

"The science is very clear. It is absolutely linked to the problems with bees, the death of bees, but also the sub-lethal effects on bees, such as disorientation, which leads to colony failure," Miller said in an interview with CBC's [The Exchange with Amanda Lang](#).

"The new information that is just before us and very alarming is that the impact on the ecosystem is much greater and much broader. The bees are the canary in the coalmine," he added.

Miller says Ontario faces a potential ecological and economic crisis because of the disappearance of bees, which pollinate hundreds of crops in the province.

Ontario urged to move soon

The federal government is studying the effects of three of the pesticides on bee colonies in agricultural areas, after putting in place a plan to mitigate dust during seed treatment.

Ontario has said it will [wait for the results of those trials](#) before it makes a recommendation to restrict neonicotinoids, as has been done in Europe and proposed in the U.S.

Miller recommends Ontario act even if the federal government doesn't. It would be Health Canada's role to ban neonicotinoids.

He urges the province to adopt an ecological approach to pest control that minimizes use of pesticides. Crop rotation, improved planting techniques and pest resistant crops can help eliminate the need for pesticides in agriculture.

It will take farmers time to adapt to the changes, but pollinators may not have time, he warned.

"Right now, we're caught. These pesticides were approved by the federal government and subsequently scheduled for use by the provincial government and right now they are embedded in the agriculture system. The seeds for the next few years of corn and soybeans are already being coated," Miller said.

Miller urged Ontario to continue to commit money to the problem, even when its current research fund runs out.

Bats, butterflies at risk

He recommends the Ontario government commit longer-term funding to study how the pesticides remain in soil and water and move within ecosystems as more creatures, including birds, bats, butterflies and aquatic insects, may be at risk from neonicotinoids.

In his annual report, Miller also calls on the government to ban logging in Algonquin Park, the only one of the 339 provincial parks where timber harvesting is allowed.

The commissioner says the Environment Ministry must do more to resolve what he calls the health crisis at a First Nation near Sarnia, which receives millions of kilograms of air pollution from the nearby petro-chemical complex known as "chemical valley."

He calls the situation a "historic failure," and says it's "truly shameful" that a promised review of the cumulative effects of air pollution on the Aamjiwnaang First Nation still isn't done after five years.

Miller also slams the Liberal government's efforts to control urban sprawl in the Greater Golden Horseshoe from Niagara to Toronto, saying allowing low density projects only puts pressure on municipalities to open more lands for development.

"In Ontario we had a growth plan that was supposed to end sprawl in the greater Golden Horseshoe around Toronto. In fact, we've backed down, watered down and weakened those positions such that sprawl is back and we're consuming land again," Miller said.

With files from the Canadian Press