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Alberta beekeepers won’t support lawsuit

By QMI Agency
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A proposed class action suit against two farm chemical giants by Ontario honey producers has suffered a major setback with the announcement that the Alberta Beekeepers Commission doesn’t support the action.

The suit, filed in Ontario Superior Court on behalf of Munro Honey and Sun Parlour Honey, seeks $450 million in damages from Bayer Crop Science and Syngenta for losses allegedly caused by a widely used agriculture seed treatment called neoinicotinoids.

The Alberta group, which accounts for 45 per cent of the Canadian honey industry, says it doesn’t endorse the class action suit because the seed treatment technology “significantly reduces honeybee exposure to pesticides.”

The commission “believes that the agrochemical industry recognizes the value of honeybees and other pollinators. We believe that working together with appropriate research, management and education of all stakeholders will ensure that modern agriculture and honeybees can coexist.”

“The Canadian Honey Council and most provincial beekeeping organizations have been working, and will continue working, together with all agricultural stakeholders to ensure that the entire agriculture industry will be sustainable today and into the future.”

A class action suit has to be certified by a court before it can proceed. Part of that process usually involves ensuring that there is widespread support among the potential plaintiffs. Until it certifies the suit, the court doesn’t collect any evidence.

The Ontario suit singles out the neonic seed treatment for causing widespread bee deaths in Ontario during ‘12 and ‘13. However the Alberta group says the pesticides used before neonics were adopted by corn, soybean and canola growers were more damaging to bees.

The suit’s proponents also won’t enjoy the latest testimony to the Senate agriculture committee by a bee health expert.

Dr. Geoffrey Williams, who works for the University of Bern’s Bee Health group as well as being Secretary of COLOSS, which represents bee specialists from 60 countries, studied for four years in Canada.

Like previous expert witnesses have told the senators, Williams said “introduced exotic parasites, agriculture and beekeeping pesticides and land use are currently the most important threats to honeybee health and most likely contribute to the majority of honeybee colony deaths annually.

“A single honeybee colony can be concurrently exposed to a number of stressors,” he said.

“Our Canadian data show that a single honeybee colony can be infested by both Varroa mites, up to six viruses and a couple of parasites. It often is fed “a nutritionally deficient sucrose solution in the autumn after its honey is removed.” Hives are treated with a pesticide to control the Varroa mite as well as exposed to agricultural pesticides.

He said honeybee research needs to focus on the Varroa mite, which “remains the most ubiquitous, single greatest threat to honeybee health in combinat ion with the viruses it transmits.”

“A recent study by the University of Guelph’s Ernesto Guzman further supports that this parasite is highly relevant to the Canadian beekeeping situation. Yet, despite its importance, its sustainable, long-term strategy has not been successfully developed or adopted.”

The greatest pesticide threat comes from the chemical residues of the pesticides used to combat the Varroa mites, he added. “Exposures to these residues are known to affect honeybees, particularly queens, during development. Furthermore, these chemicals support the propagation of colonies susceptible to mites, essentially propping up unhealthy colonies year after year.”

He did urge further research into the impact of neonic pesticides. “What is not fully understood is their effect upon whole honeybee colonies, and those few monitoring and epidemiological studies that have occurred suggest there are no associations between neonicotinoids and honeybee colony productivity and survival. Because of the few data available, and because of the widespread use of neonicotinoids for food production, more colony level studies are urgently required.”

The high fructose corn syrup or sucrose used to feed bees after the honey is removed from the hive “may severely impair a honeybee’s ability to defend against disease,” he continued. “A limited amount of field-level research has been performed, particularly regarding how farming practices can successfully incorporate honeybee nutritious forage, long field crop margins and how beekeepers can improve the nutrition of their colonies while still managing them for honey production and crop pollination.”

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