

Ontario to restrict use of pesticide linked to bee deaths

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The Ontario government plans to restrict the agricultural use of a class of pesticides linked to the widespread declines in honeybees and other pollinators.

The move is hotly opposed by the province's chemical and agriculture industries, which say neonicotinoid pesticides are vital tools to protect corn, soybeans and other crops from insects.

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But the pesticide, which renders plants toxic to pests, has been blamed for the deaths of honeybees and other beneficial insects that are responsible for pollinating one-third of the food we eat.

The province said on Tuesday it wants to reduce the acreage planted with neonic-treated seeds by 80 per cent by 2017. To do so, the government is proposing a regulatory system under which seeds treated with neonics would be treated separately under the Pesticides Act. The sale and use of these seeds would be restricted to "qualified" farmers who can show their fields are susceptible to pests, verified by a third party. Farmers must also complete pest management training and document their efforts to eliminate pests such as wire worms and grubs.

The province has said just 10 per cent to 20 per cent of the five million corn and soybean acreage requires neonics to ward off yield-destroying insects.

Ontario would become the first province or state in North America to regulate the pesticides, which are halfway through a two-year moratorium in Europe amid concerns over environmental impacts.

"Our agricultural industry depends on safe, healthy lands to be productive. This is why Ontario farmers have taken significant action to reduce pesticide use, reducing overall usage by some 45 per cent in the past three decades," Jeff Leal, provincial Minister of Agriculture, said in a press release.

"We know there is more that can be done, and we will work with farmers to protect the environment and grow the agricultural sector."

The Grain Farmers of Ontario said the target reduction of 80 per cent is effectively a ban that disregards efforts its members have taken to reduce risks to honeybees. "A reduction at this level puts our farmers at a competitive disadvantage with the rest of the country and the rest of the North America," says Barry Senft, chief executive officer of Grain Farmers of Ontario. "It will mean smaller margins for grain farmers and could signal the transition away from family farms to large multinational farming operations that can sustain lower margins."

Farmers changed their planting methods in the past spring to minimize the amount of neonic-laced dust that is kicked up during seeding by fitting their machines with deflectors, at the direction of Health Canada. And neonic-treated seed now comes with a wax-based fluency agent that is intended to reduce the dust that can be immediately fatal to bees.

"This new regulation is unfounded, impractical, and unrealistic and the government does not know how to implement it," says Henry Van Ankum, chairman of Grain Farmers of Ontario, which speaks for 28,000 farmers.

The chemical companies that make neonics and are the main sellers of pesticide-coated seeds say the pesticides are safe if used as directed, and are less harmful to people and the environment than older classes of chemicals.

But Tibor Szabo, president of the Ontario Beekeepers Association, said a raft of studies have shown “overuse” of neonics is the core problem for honeybee health. The blanket use of the chemicals has discouraged farmers from trying other methods to control pests, Mr. Szabo said.

The manufacturers deny bees are in trouble.

“Canadian agriculture has never been more sustainable than it is today and that’s thanks in part to modern technologies like neonicotinoid seed treatments,” said CropLife Canada, the group that represents Syngenta, Bayer and other makers of pesticides.

More than half of the hives in Ontario did not survive the past winter, losses beekeepers and some scientists say are attributable to neonic poisoning on top of the other threats to bees, which include virus-carrying mites and starvation over long winters. Losses across Canada averaged 25 per cent, higher than the 15 per cent that is considered normal and sustainable, said the Canadian Association of Professional Apiarists.

Ontario said it wanted to reduce winter bee deaths to 15 per cent by 2020.

“The province will consult on a proposal to reduce the use of neonicotinoid-treated corn and soybean seed. If approved, new rules on the use of neonicotinoids will be in place by July 1, 2015, in time for the 2016 agricultural planting season,” the government said in a statement.

In Ontario, all corn for grain, canola and most soybean seeds are coated with neonics. The pesticide is also used by greenhouse growers of fruits and vegetables.

Meanwhile, Health Canada is re-evaluating its approval of products containing the three most widely used neonics – imidacloprid, clothianidin and thiamethoxam – in partnership with the U.S. regulator.

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