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Alberta beekeepers oppose pesticide ban



AMANDA STEPHENSON, CALGARY HERALD

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Ontario has announced plans to restrict the use of controversial pesticides believed to be responsible for mass deaths of bees, in order to safeguard crops.



SECTIONS

Alberta farmers and beekeepers say the Ontario government is making a mistake with its plan to restrict certain agricultural pesticides in an effort to combat bee deaths.

The move, the first of its kind in North America, will see Ontario crack down on the sale of neonicotinoid pesticides, which have been linked to large-scale honeybee deaths in that province. Not only have Ontario beekeepers lobbied for a moratorium on the use of this class of pesticide, but some have launched a class-action lawsuit against the chemical companies that make the products.

Here in Alberta, though, beekeepers say there is no evidence that neonicotinoid pesticides are harming their hives. And canola growers — virtually all of whom use seed treated with the product — are fearful that Ontario's move could inspire similar bans or restrictions elsewhere.

"The government of Ontario has decided to reduce the use of a product without a plan for what's going to happen to solve the problems that farmers are going to face," said Ward Toma, general manager of the Alberta Canola Producers Commission. "They're giving the consuming public the absolute wrong impression, and they're creating a fear about the food system that should not exist."

Neonicotinoid pesticides have been in use in Canada for about a decade. When they were introduced, they were considered safer for the environment than alternative pesticides because they could be used as seed treatments rather than broad spectrum sprays and targeted only the insects directly attacking the plants.

There were no significant reports of bee mortalities associated with neonicotinoids in Canada until the spring of 2012, when a large number of bee deaths began to occur in parts of Ontario.

The resulting Health Canada investigation concluded that dust generated during seeding contained traces of the pesticides, and appeared to be playing a role in bee mortality.

Since then, a number of mitigation measures have been put in place, including new dust deflectors on seeding equipment and the development of a dust-prevention coating on neonic-treated seed.

Health Canada stated earlier this week that bee-mortality reports associated with pesticide use during 2014 are 70 per cent lower than in 2013. Still, the agency continues to review the use of the products, in partnership with regulatory bodies in the United States.

Toma said the problem with a ban or restriction like the one in Ontario is that it could force



ers back to an older class of pesticides, such as the organophosphates once used by canola
ers.

“That stuff was effective, but nasty,” Toma said. “That’s why we want to use the neonicotinoids — they’re not very toxic at all.”

Kevin Nixon, an Innisfail beekeeper and director of the Alberta Beekeepers Commission, said he sees no reason to take an important tool away from the agriculture industry. Alberta produces 50 per cent of Canada’s honey, yet has not seen the kind of massive bee die-offs that have been experienced in Ontario.

“The prairie provinces are very exposed to these neonics, because all canola seed is treated with them, and we just have not seen what they’re claiming in Ontario,” Nixon said.

Julie Crilly, press secretary for Alberta’s Agriculture Minister Verlyn Olson, said there are no plans in this province to restrict the use of neonicotinoids. She pointed out that Alberta’s bee winterkill rates have actually declined by 50 per cent since 2010. And a provincial study that examined bee pollen collected in Alberta found non-existent — or very minimal — levels of neonic residue.

Still, Crilly said, the government has established a honeybee health surveillance program and is working with the federal government to monitor the potential impact of pesticide use.

“We are gathering information and will make any necessary decisions based on sound scientific evidence,” she said.

astephenon@calgaryherald.com (mailto:astephenon@calgaryherald.com)

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