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No plans to follow Ontario's lead on pesticides

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While an acceptable winter bee loss is about 15 per cent, 18.9 per cent of the province's bees died last winter, however it's lower than the five-year average of 21 per cent.

Photograph by: Getty Images Files , The Starphoenix

Saskatchewan has no immediate plans to follow Ontario's lead by restricting the use of pesticides that have been linked to bee deaths.

No dead bees in Saskatchewan have yet been linked to exposure to neonicotinoid pesticides that are often applied to seeds, said Janice Tranberg, an assistant deputy minister of agriculture.

"This particular product is the most successful product to help us manage pests," Tranberg said. "When you have a coated seed that is then inserted into the soil, this is probably the most effective and has probably the least environmental impact."

A University of Saskatchewan ecotoxicology professor says her research has found neonicotinoids hurt other insects whose larvae grow in water, and may also starve or sicken the birds who eat them.

"The science is the same here as it is in other places in the country," Prof. Christy Morrissey said. "I would hope that similar action can be taken, and where Saskatchewan could be one of the leaders for the Prairies in managing pesticide use to maintain biodiversity."

On Tuesday, the Ontario government announced it plans to cut the use of neonicotinoid pesticides (neonics for short) by 80 per cent within three years. Corn and soybean farmers would be first to face restrictions. It was the first jurisdiction in North America to move to limit their use.

Fifty-eight per cent of Ontario bees died last winter. An acceptable winter bee loss is about 15 per cent, according to a government press release.

Things aren't so dire for the pollinating insects in Saskatchewan, where 18.9 per cent of the province's bees died last winter, Tranberg said. That's lower than the five-year average of 21 per cent, she said.

Ontario may have more problems because neonic-treated corn and soy seeds are planted using different machinery than the crops most often planted in Saskatchewan, she said.

Still, Morrissey says neonics are "ubiquitous" in Saskatchewan. Between 95 and 99 per cent of canola seeds planted in the province are coated in neonics, as is a large fraction of wheat, she said. Their use is also approved on corn, barley, oats, soybeans, and lentils. With crops rotating between fields each year, it is everywhere.

When it rains, those neonics end up in the water.

At least one worldwide review of neonic use recommended regulators substantially scale back their use or risk "substantial impacts on biodiversity and ecosystem functioning."

Morrissey's research has found more than 80 per cent of tested Saskatchewan wetlands had neonic levels at least three times higher than is tolerable by insects.

A new review authored by Morrissey and her colleagues in the journal Environment International found that levels of neonics in surface water commonly exceed local guidelines. They also looked at how sensitive 49 different insects were to neonics, and found they vary greatly. Based on those findings, the researchers recommended lower acceptable limits in water to protect organisms that are exposed to the chemicals repeatedly over time.

Some of the insects vulnerable to neonics are food for swifts, swallows, and farmland birds, whose populations are declining more rapidly than other bird groups, Morrissey said.

Small birds may also get sick by eating the coated seeds, she said. Although researchers have established a correlation, it's hard to prove a direct link.

"Like the bees, you can't say it's only the pesticide that's causing those declines," Morrissey said.

Jake Berg, president of the Saskatchewan Beekeepers Association, said he's okay with the status quo on neonic use in Saskatchewan.

"I don't think we have an appetite at this time to have a restriction in place," he said.

Although the government is following Morrissey's research closely, Tranberg said she's waiting for final results expected in 2016.

The federal government's Pest Management Regulatory Agency, which establishes limits on pesticide use, is also reviewing the evidence on neonics, Tranberg said. Tranberg came to her government job after spending six years at CropLife Canada, an industry association that represents the makers of pesticides. CropLife decried Ontario's move, calling it "ill-informed" and a "non-science based approach."

Neonics are a "valuable tool" that keeps the flea beetle away from Saskatchewan's canola, Tranberg said.

According to the agriculture ministry, canola was seeded on more than 10 million acres in Saskatchewan in 2013, and contributed $4.5 billion to the provincial economy.

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