NEWS LOCAL

Opinions divided over the use of neonicotinoid-treated seeds in relation to the health of bees

By Cheryl Browne, Barrie Examiner
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If bees are an indicator of Mother Nature's health, than some say their demise is a harbinger of genetically modified food.

The provincial government has taken the much-anticipated step of calling for an 80% reduction of the use of neonicotinoid-treated corn and soybean seed by 2017.

"There is overwhelming science pointing to the overuse of neonicotinoid pesticides as the central issue for bee health," said Tibor Szabo, president of the Ontario Beekeepers' Association (OBA).

During the last three years, beekeepers like Szabo began raising the alarm as bees began dropping dead at distressing rates.

While a 15% winter die-off is deemed acceptable in the industry, the numbers had increased to 34% over the last dozen years and to 58% last year alone.

But it wasn't only the winter die-offs that were causing concern.

Even during summer months, beekeepers were alarmed when 240 bee yards across the province suffered high mortality rates. That rose to 340 beekeepers who reported huge losses in 2013.

The federal Pest Management Regulatory Authority (PMRA) found that 70% of dead bees from 2012, and 75% from 2013, tested positive for neonicotinoid residues.

"The OBA appreciates the government's recognition that the prophylactic (preventative) use of neonicotinoid-coated seed on Ontario's corn and soy crops is unwarranted and unacceptable," Szabo said.

In essence, corn and soy seeds arrive pre-coated with a neonicotinoid or pesticide dust that spread into the soil and water courses through runoff when farmers seeded their fields.

Residue from the dust seems to have been the culprit behind the bee deaths, and once it started showing up on the radar, reports that many European countries had made the same determination and banned its use came to light this year.

"Bees are an indicator of a complex environment," said Morris Gervais, owner of Barrie Hill Farms.

But as many beekeepers and farmers know, the use of pesticides has created picky customers, who demand unblemished, pest-free produce.

"We've come to expect pristine produce, so what are farmers to do? And, what will the customer accept?"

Gervais used the analogy of planting a potato seed and by adding a small amount of neonicotinoid to the potato at planting, it kills the Colorado potato beetle after it eats the potato leaves.

"Now the farmer doesn't have to spray insecticides over the course of the summer and he doesn't lose his crop," he said. "But if neonicotinoids are not used initially, the farmer has to spray with another pesticide (several times). When farmers switched to this, it was safer and they were saving multiple passes of insecticide," Gervais said, adding that cuts down on carbon emissions and diesel fuel, etc.

He said Barrie Hill Farms uses the most safe and least impacting pesticides on its sweet corn, otherwise people would be opening up the husks to find worms left over from moths and other pests.

Croplife Canada, a lobby group for the pesticide industry, waded into the mix denouncing the Ontario government's decision to impose a reduction in the use of neonicotinoids.

In its statement released earlier this week, Croplife stated, "Neonicotinoid seed treatments have contributed to the adoption of conservation and no-till practices for farmers. If farmers lose access to this technology, they will be forced to revert to tilling their fields because they will no longer be able to control the insects that thrive under these conditions. This, in turn, will increase greenhouse emissions and reduce soil health."

Pierre Petelle, Croplife Canada's vice-president of chemistry, said corn and soy farmers had adjusted their planting schedules to reduce the amount of dust exposure to the bees and he believes 2014's bee morbidity figures will be significantly less.

"The province has over-reacted to this completely," Petelle said.

Petelle says the same day the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs released its findings, the PRMA released figures showing the number of incidents associated with neonicotinoid use in the planting period in 2014 is 70% lower than in 2013, but that a direct correlation cannot be made because the long, cold spring delayed planting.

The alternative to neonicotinoids and pesticide spraying is adding an enzyme to the seed before it grows which will be repugnant to insects, mixing the animal and plant kingdoms together, Gervais said.

However, many people don't want to eat genetically modified organisms or GMOs.

A report by the Canadian Biotechnology Action Network this week told seed growers about a guide listing the genetically modified sweet corn varieties on the market in an effort to encourage more farmers to choose non-GMO seeds.

"Farmers and gardeners are thumbing through seed catalogs now, but GM seeds are not always clearly labelled and some vegetable growers are asking us how to identify GM seeds," said Lucy Sharratt with the action network.

The Ottawa-based network tested 137 samples of sweet corn in 2014 and found only one sample of GM corn that had been grown in Quebec.

Sweet corn is the only genetically modified product available in Canada, said Wayne Gale of Stokes Seeds.

Gale said the average garden vegetable gardener can't even buy it because it's sold in quantities of 25,000 seeds or more, and a contract indicating the consumer understands what they're buying.

"So, the long and short of it is the home gardener would have to go a long way to plant these," he said.

The U.S. allows a strain of genetically modified yellow squash seed to be grown in several states, however Canadians can't plant it or sell it, but we are allowed to eat it if we get our hands on it, Gale said.

There may be no clear, defined answer what's going to occur in future healthy farming practices, but both scientists and farmers are calling for a measured response to pesticide bans in the future.

"I hope it's solid scientific information giving us this decision, not an irrational fear of something misunderstood," Gervais said.

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JUST THE FACTS

Pollinators play a critical role in agriculture and the natural environment. Many crops and flowering plants that depend on pollinators are important sources of food, habitat, shelter and other resources for people and wildlife. Crops such as apples, cherries, peaches, plums, cucumbers, asparagus, squash pumpkins, and melons need help from pollinators to grow.

Most plants can't produce seeds and fruit without the pollen transferred by pollinators.

With more than 700 native species in Canada, bees are the most common pollinator. Both managed and wild pollinators play a critical role in the production of most fruits and vegetables and reproduction of flowering plants.

Ontario's honey bees pollinate approximately $897 million of the roughly $6.7 billion in total sales for agricultural crops grown in the province, or about 13% of the total crop value.

In Ontario, 3,000 registered beekeepers operate 100,000 honey bee colonies. The honey produced by these bees is a $26-million industry.

In addition, Ontario honey bee colonies are transported to eastern Canada to pollinate approximately $71 million of the blueberry and cranberry crops.

Source: Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs.

Reader's comments »

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Norah G Fon • 5 minutes ago

Hold on, this is waiting to be approved by Barrie Examiner.

NORAHG OPPOSES THE ONTARIO PROPOSAL THAT WILL RECKLESSLY PROHIBIT AGAINST IRREPLACEABLE NEONICOTINOID INSECTICIDES — THIS ARBITRARY PROHIBITION MUST BE STOPPED, FOREVER !

On November 25th, 2014, Ontario's government officials proposed a province-wide prohibition against neonicotinoid insecticides desperately needed by the agriculture industry. http://tinyurl.com/o3tf4sv They are falsely alleging that these insecticides, desperately needed by the agriculture industry, are the cause of so-called bee colony collapse disorder — in fact, bee losses occur because some bee-keepers may be wholly unsuited to be raising bees. Overall, there is NO bee crisis in Ontario because of insecticides, and ANY prohibition is NOT necessary ! Government officials under the Liberal Party, and bee conspiracy terrorists, are NOT credible sources of real scientific information upon which this political decision about prohibition can be made. It is inescapable that the allegations against neonicotinoid insecticides are FALSE ! If we had less conventional neonicotinoid use in Ontario, we would still have bee colony collapse disorder, because many bee-keepers are NOT competent to manage their hives. There is NO other recourse but litigation and complaints ! CropLife Canada, Grain Farmers of Ontario, and all agricultural businesses, must sue the anti-neonicotinoid SOBs' brains out ! They must stop the proposed prohibition in Ontario, whatever the cost may be ! They must demand that the proposed prohibition be stopped, forever. For more information, go to The Pesticide Truths Web-Site ... http://wp.me/p1jq40-8FZ We are the National Organization Responding Against HUJE that seek to destroy the Green space and other industries (NORAH G). Get the latest details at http://pesticidetruths.com/ http://pesticidetruths.com/toc... http://wp.me/P1jq40-2rr https://www.facebook.com/norah... WILLIAM H GATHERCOLE AND NORAH G

SUE THE SOBs' BRAINS OUT ! (Blog)

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