ECO-IMPERIALISM
Green power. Black Death. The official site of Paul K. Driessen.

Bee facts changed – green agendas did not

June 10, 2015

By Paul Driessen

Activists and White House appear ready to present new justifications for unjustified policies

Paul Driessen

The White House finally appears ready to announce conclusions and policy recommendations from the Pollinator Task Force it appointed a year ago. Environmentalist groups eagerly await the decision. After clamoring and campaigning for years for government action, they hope to get tough restrictions on using innovative new insecticides called neonicotinoids.

Agricultural interests await the decision with trepidation. A ban or broad restrictions would cost billions of dollars annually, force them to employ pesticides that are more difficult to use and more toxic for beneficial insects, and compel them to confront more secretive government "science" and faulty justifications for policies that are not supported by the evidence.

The deadline imposed by President Obama's task force memo passed months ago, and yet the White House has been strangely silent on the issue of pesticides and honeybee health. What initially looked like an easy lame-duck giveaway to green groups has turned out to be factually complicated.

Long before the White House weighed in, anti-insecticide activists promoted claims that honeybees were headed for extinction because of pesticides, specifically neonics – unless the government banned them. Time magazine picked up their refrain, devoting a long cover story to the scary prospect of “a world without bees.” Other news stories uncritically repeated the end-of-bees assertions. One-third of the food we eat could disappear without bees to pollinate crops, they proclaimed. But there was a problem.

The narrative turned out to be false, extensive evidence now demonstrates – and inconvenient truths had gotten in the way of another slam-dunk Executive Branch edict.

Neonicotinoids are actually much less toxic for bees, other insects, humans and animals than alternative pesticides, in part because they are primarily used to coat seeds. The neonics become part of the plant’s tissue structure and defense system, affecting only pests that feed on the protected crops. Farmers can greatly reduce pesticide spraying, especially with older, more toxic chemicals.

Field studies have repeatedly shown that bees are unaffected by neonics at real-world exposure levels. In fact, bees thrive in canola (oilseed rape) fields and other crops grown with neonic-treated seeds, and the number of bees has been rising steadily worldwide the past few years, even as neonic usage peaked.

U.S. Department of Agriculture annual beekeeper surveys reveal that the number of honey-producing hives in the United States has held steady at about 2.5 million since 1995. Indeed, the numbers increased four of the last five years and are actually higher now than when neonics first came on the market in the mid 1990s. Most beehive problems now involve less experienced hobby beekeepers.

A similarly hyped issue, “colony collapse disorder,” turned out to be a cyclical problem going back centuries. Recent large-scale die-offs of domesticated bees appear to be caused primarily by Varroa mites (which feed on bees and can transmit bee viruses and diseases), parasitic phorid flies, Nosema intestinal fungi, and tobacco ringspot viruses. Beekeepers have accidentally killed entire hives trying to combat these problems.

Honeybee habitat loss from urban, suburban and even agricultural development has also taken a toll. Just removing fences, to improve agricultural efficiencies and let cattle roam and feed, reduces bee forage and nutrition. That further increases bees' susceptibility to mites, disease and stress, entomologist and professional beekeeper Randy Oliver told me.

But facts like these never stopped organizations like Beyond Pesticides and the Natural Resources Defense Council from claiming America and the world faced a "bee-pocalypse" – and the cause was never a convergence of problems; it was always because of their newest bogeyman: neonicotinoids.
The facts likewise never stopped the White House from telling the EPA to scrutinize neonics intently, in the name of protecting pollinators.

Eventually, though, the facts caught up with the fear-mongering. As journalists wrote articles exposing the environmentalist falsehoods, the "honeybee Armageddon" justification began falling apart.

The White House and Big Green pressure groups did not want egg on their face. What to do? The preferred tactic: postpone the task force report and stall for time to concoct a new fable. It had worked before on other issues. A compliant, allied media and gullible public should make it work again.

The anti-pesticide groups used the postponement to switch their rationale for restricting neonics. Instead of critical threats to managed honeybees, they now say it is native or wild bees that need help. The shift reflects a shrewd, cynical calculation.

Since there are far fewer studies on the status of wild bee populations, activists can make any claims they like. As the NRDC's Jennifer Sass said in November 2014, environmentalist groups can only "presume" that wild bees are in decline. But they sure know how to get ample press coverage for their presumption.

They, the White House and EPA need to check their facts this time. U.S. Geological Survey wild bee specialist Sam Droege says scientists still don't know which species

are declining or flourishing, but he believes most are doing fine. (There are some 4,000 native species of wild bees in North America.)

Similarly, a 2013 study in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences analyzed U.S. native bee populations over a 140-year period and echoed that assessment. Of 187 native species analyzed, only three showed steep declines, and they were likely due to pathogens.

This may be why anti-pesticide activists are simultaneously employing another new tactic. By combining summer and winter bee losses, they can make it look like the honeybee crisis is worsening, as a May 14 Wall Street Journal article put it. This stratagem also benefits from the fact that summertime loss data go back only five years, so there is no way to look for historical trends or patterns.

The White House would do well to leave science to experts, rather than activists with an ax to grind. If bee numbers are increasing, it is much harder to justify restricting a pesticide that is needed by farmers – and that would be much better for honeybees, wild bees and other beneficial insects.

As Randy Oliver emphasizes, it is important to let science do its job, figure out and address what is really happening to bees, use all insecticides carefully and responsibly, and not stigmatize neonic seed treatments on ideological or junk science grounds.

Otherwise, bee problems are likely to get worse, while neonic bans cause crop losses and a return to spraying pesticides that really can cause significant environmental problems.

Paul Driessen is senior policy analyst for the Committee For A Constructive Tomorrow (www.CFACT.org), author of Eco-Imperialism: Green power – Black death and coauthor of Cracking Big Green: To save the world from the save-the-earth money machine.