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Ontario will profit from being kind to bees

By becoming the first province to wean itself off of neonics, a kind of pesticide known to kill bees, Ontario will reap significant rewards.



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A comprehensive analysis of more than 1,200 scientific studies on the ecological effects of neonics concluded that the pesticides harm bees.

By: Lisa Gue Published on Mon Jun 15 2015

Last week, Ontario [officially posted amendments](#) to its pesticide regulation that will restrict the use and sale of seeds treated with neonicotinoid pesticides. It's a North American first, but other jurisdictions are sure to follow suit. Evidence-based decision-making requires a global phase-out of these chemicals.

The evidence is clear. A comprehensive analysis of more than 1,200 scientific studies on the ecological effects of neonics, conducted by the international Task Force on Systemic Pesticides, concluded that neonics harm bees, as well as other non-target species.

Beekeepers in Ontario and Quebec have witnessed the acute, lethal affects first-hand. Reports of sudden bee die-offs during planting season in corn- and soy-growing areas prompted Health Canada to investigate. They detected neonic residue in the bodies and hives of dead bees and concluded that neonic-laced dust — generated when treated seeds are planted — is contributing to bee mortality.

Long-term effects are more insidious, though they receive less attention. Neonics are nerve poisons. Repeated exposure even at low levels can interfere with the information-processing abilities of [insect pollinators](#) and other invertebrates. The Task Force study uncovered evidence of impaired sense of smell and memory, effects on reproduction, altered feeding behaviour and increased susceptibility to disease.

Moreover, neonic seed treatments appear to have little benefit to agricultural production. A leaked federal government analysis estimated neonics contribute just 0.4 per cent of the total value of soy production in Canada and 3.6 per cent in the case of corn. This is consistent with a similar U.S. EPA assessment.

No justification exists for continuing to contaminate our environment with harmful chemicals that serve no useful purpose. Currently, virtually all corn and 60 per cent of soy planted in Ontario is treated with neonics as a matter of course. Ontario's new regulation aims to reduce these uses by 80 per cent by 2017, allowing neonics only where relevant insect pests are present. Given the evidence of harm and their negligible value to agriculture, an outright ban on neonics would be reasonable and simpler to implement.

So why haven't the federal government and other provinces taken action on neonics? The pesticide lobby and some agricultural interests are running a well-funded campaign to oppose any restrictions, including ads in papers across the province, including the Toronto Star. Globally, neonic sales are worth \$2.6 billion a year, so the potential war

chest to fight any controls on neonics is considerable. But pollinators must trump profits. Our food supply depends on it.

After Italy banned the use of neonic-treated corn seed in 2008, sudden bee die-offs in corn-planting regions were virtually eliminated within one year. The Italian Beekeepers' Association reported that hives were flourishing again, while crop production did not suffer. Other countries in Europe took note and a moratorium on certain uses of neonics throughout the European Union was introduced in 2013. We can expect similar results in Ontario.

Ontario's determined effort to wean the province from neonics demonstrates that, despite fierce pushback from multibillion-dollar companies profiting from pesticide sales, strong science bolstered by public support for protecting pollinators is prevailing. This is good news story — one that other provinces and the federal government should follow closely.

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