

[Alec \(American Legislative Exchange Council\)](#)

'Beepocalypse Not': Alec lobbyists abuzz in defense of pesticides amid die-offs

Controversial conservative group says bee deaths have been overhyped and blame poor land management: 'We're not in a battle against nature'



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Barack Obama may be pushing America into an abyss of gay-loving, Iran-hugging, welfare-splurging socialist ruin, but conservatives can console themselves with at least one piece of good news: the "[beepocalypse](#)" is over.

Market forces have helped tame the mysterious plague which wiped out bee colonies over the past decade – a phenomenon more formally known as colony collapse disorder – and the US need no longer fear a future without honey, pollination or food.

This was the message delivered to Republican legislators and lobbyists at this week's annual meeting in San Diego of the [American Legislative Exchange Council](#) (Alec), one of the nation's most controversial and powerful lobbying networks.

It was a striking gleam of optimism amid dour fulminations against same-sex marriage, the Iran nuclear deal and Obamacare from keynote speakers such as presidential candidates Scott Walker and Mike Huckabee.

"The term 'beepocalypse' was hype and focused on the wrong issues," Angela Logomasini, a senior fellow at the Competitive Enterprise Institute, told the Guardian on Friday before giving an official conference talk titled: "Beepocalypse Not".

"The issue has been way overblown. We're not in a battle against nature. It's an agricultural management issue."

This being Alec, where corporations and politicians forge common interests, Logomasini had a pointed conclusion: pesticides are OK.

Other factors hurt bees, not pesticides, and so the US should resist pressure to ban them. "The reality," Logomasini said, "is without these products we can't produce enough food at low cost."

Companies such as Bayer, Syngenta and Monsanto, in other words, were innocent of colony collapse disorder – also known as "beemaggedon" – and the Obama administration should avoid following the European Union's "unscientific" crackdown on a class of pesticides called [neonicotinoids](#).

"The Europeans jumped the gun. The US hasn't regulated yet but federal policy is drifting in the wrong direction," said Logomasini.

Tiffany Finck-Haynes, a bee specialist with Friends of the Earth, disagreed. US bees are in bad shape and scientific research increasingly blames neonicotinoids, she said,

prompting pesticide makers to wage a public relations campaign to avert action by the Environmental Protection Agency.

“They’re worried,” Finck-Haynes. “They’re trying to manufacture doubt and spin the science to downplay the role of pesticides.”

A Friends of the Earth report last year titled “[Follow the honey](#)” accused the industry of mimicking underhand public relations tactics used by tobacco and fossil fuel companies.

Both sides agree the stakes are high. Bee pollination of crops has been valued at \$20bn in the US and \$217bn worldwide. Honeybee pollination benefits about one third of US food production, according to the US Department of Agriculture.

Since about 2006 beekeepers have recorded mysterious mass die-offs ranging from 20% to 40% of managed honeybee colonies each winter. A sustained net loss of 30% per year would swiftly lead to no colonies at all.

Environmentalists say neonicotinoids, which are used as seed treatments on more than 140 crops, attack bees’ nervous and immune systems and disrupt their navigation, learning, communication, memory and foraging abilities, leaving them vulnerable to disease and pests.

The pesticide makers concede problems with hive health exist but say the real culprits are the varroa mite, degraded foraging habitats and poor land management, including the overuse of pesticides. In an increasingly polarised, politicised battle, [each side cites scientific studies](#) to support its claims.

Honeybees are at no risk of extinction. In the past decade the number of colonies in the US has actually risen, [from 2.4m to 2.7m](#). The explanation: beekeepers are more than replenishing the losses by splitting healthy colonies into two separate colonies, and by simply buying packages of bees which include queens. It is an apparent triumph of market forces.

Even so, concern over hive health prompted a recent White House policy framework – the [National Strategy to Promote the Health of Honey Bees and Other Pollinators](#). Few

expect it to emulate the EU's suspension of the three major neonicotinoids – imidacloprid, clothianidin and thiamethoxam – but it may curb usage.

Finck-Haynes said the “Beepocalypse Not” narrative in San Diego, where hundreds of legislators and lobbyists charted conservative policies over three days, reflected the pesticide industry's public relations fightback.

Logomasini's group, the [Competitive Enterprise Institute](#), is a libertarian thinktank. It does not reveal funding sources but the Koch brothers and fossil fuel companies are believed to be big donors.

“They have a stake in conservative policies,” said Finck-Haynes.

The Center for Media and Democracy, a watchdog group, said that until recently Bayer, which sells more than \$1bn worth of neonicotinoids each year, had a representative on Alec's corporate board and wished to sow scientific doubt in San Diego.

“At this meeting, Alec is denying more than climate change,” [a CMD statement said](#). “It also is apparently denying the mass die-off of bees.”

Colin Dunn, a spokesperson for Bayer, said no company representative attended the conference. Bill Meierling, a spokesperson for Alec, was unable to immediately confirm that. The “Beepocalypse Not” session, like other non-plenary talks, was off-limits to media.

In a phone interview from Bayer CropScience's headquarters in North Carolina, Becky Langer, director of the company's bee care programme, said she had nothing to do with the lobbying fest in California.

“I don't know what Alec is,” she said.

Langer said Bayer CropScience had promoted education through a “Bee Care Tour” in 2013 and 2014, which spread the message that there was no bee apocalypse. Neonicotinoids were safe if used correctly, she said, but farmers and ordinary gardeners were not always “reading the label correctly”.

Logomasini, speaking in an interview before her official talk, said her approval of pesticides was rooted in scientific evidence. They were “not zero risk” but accounted for just a small part of the bees’ problems and in return provided huge benefits, such as freeing up land for nature rather than agriculture.

She said she had intellectual freedom and was not beholden to the Competitive Enterprise Institute’s donors. “I can do what I want,” she said.

Independent experts, Logomasini said, had praised her “[Beepocalypse Not](#)” report, which came out in April.

The other speaker at Alec’s closed-door bee session was Todd Myers, the environmental director at the Washington Policy Center, a pro-business think tank in Seattle, and the owner of four hives which do not use pesticides. Multiple factors were killing hives, he said, and pesticides were a minor culprit.

The solution to the crisis, said Myers, expressing a core conservative principle, lay with beekeepers, not government.