

FINANCIAL POST

Ontario's neonics nightmare



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Getty ImagesThe Wynne government's decision to side with special interest groups is heavily restricting access to a critical crop management tool for Ontario corn and soybean farmers.

It's time Kathleen Wynne stepped in and stopped the growing conflict around the province's poorly thought out neonicotinoid-treated seeds restrictions before it devastates Ontario farmers.

Environmental groups opposed to pesticides in general have been calling for a neonics ban, claiming they are harmful to honeybee populations. The federal government acted to implement best management practices around the planting of neonics-treated seeds to protect honeybees, and has seen very positive results for bees, as farmers compiled. Yet the Ontario Liberals, at the urging of ENGOs who are waging a broader war, effectively banned the use of neonics anyways, throwing Ontario's \$9-billion grain farming sector into chaos.

Following months of building anger, confusion and uncertainty in rural Ontario, farmers are now getting ready to place their initial seed orders for the 2016 planting season, without knowing what they will be able to plant. This is because of the Wynne government's decision to side with special interest groups, who have a deeper issue with modern agriculture, by heavily restricting access to a critical crop management tool for corn and soybean farmers.

A regulation passed in the summer requires farmers to have done something three months earlier

Environment Minister Glen Murray has defended a truly unworkable regulation and provided a series of unhelpful and inflammatory comments to the debate, before punting the issue back to Agriculture Minister Jeff Leal, who responds to questions about corn and soybean seeds by discussing the importance of supply management for dairy and poultry products.

Premier Wynne appears to be focused on the federal election campaign and planning high speed transit for cities, while our sector suffers. The situation has gotten desperate enough that Grain Farmers of Ontario has now had to take legal action to seek to solve this issue – something that is a first for our organization.

What is most disheartening about the government's position on the neonics-treated seeds issue is a regulation passed in the summer that requires grain farmers to have done something three months earlier to be able to farm properly next year – a genuine impossibility. This decision means that the grain farmers that plant and grow more than five million acres of corn and soybeans in Ontario are, according to the Conference Board of Canada, expected to lose more than \$600 million next year.

The government's rush to implement this poorly thought out and harmful policy has effectively cost them a partner in solving the broader pollinator issues in Ontario, as grain farmers are rightly seeking distance from an issue that is being unfairly blamed on them, literally pitting bee keepers against grain farmers.

What is telling, is that the special-interest-backed Ontario Beekeepers Association has managed to avoid any real accountability for the poor hive management practices that contribute to high mortality rates, with no new regulations in place to govern how beekeepers care for their "livestock."

Grain Farmers of Ontario want to play a meaningful role in helping to contribute to a comprehensive solution that will protect pollinator health, but cannot do that until Premier Wynne steps in and suspends this regulation.

Mark Brock is Chairman, Grain Farmers of Ontario.