



NEWS LOCAL

Neonic use on seeds no danger to bees, report says



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A long-awaited federal report on a controversial crop-seed pesticide says neonicotinoids don't pose any risk to honeybees.

In a bare-bones "pre-release" summary, with a full document to be produced later this month, the Pest Management Regulatory Agency says neonics applied directly to the soil might put pollinators at risk.

But it states unequivocally, "No potential risk to bees was indicated for seed use."

That sentence is a vindication to grain farmers, who have long defended their use of the pesticide as necessary to their livelihoods.

But it's also feeding, rather than quelling, a conflict that has raged among farmers, beekeepers, environmentalists and legislators.

"Skeptical is not a strong enough word," Albert DeVries, an Aylmer beekeeper who is also a director of the Ontario Beekeepers' Association, said Wednesday in response to the agency's report.

If neonic seed treatments are harmless at planting time, DeVries said, "Then how come we had buckets of dead bees near the hives in 2012?"

And if there's no acute or long-term impact, DeVries said, the federal agency should "tell that to all the dead bees."

DeVries said the report flies in the face of previous statements of the Pest Management Regulatory Agency, including its conclusion in 2013 that the continued use of neonics is "unsustainable."

But Grain Farmers of Ontario says the report proves its position that Ontario's new neonic rules, the most restrictive in North America, are unnecessary.

It's a victory of science over sentiment, said Mark Brock, a Perth County farmer who heads the provincial group.

"We've always said, with best management practices and using the product properly on corn and soybean seeds, that there is minimal impact on bees."

Few issues in modern farming have drawn the kind of polarized debate this has.

Beekeepers have long linked massive bee deaths that have taken place during and after corn and soybeans planting to farmers' use of neonics.

Seed and seed-treatment companies have insisted any bee deaths can't be attributed to neonics but are more likely issues of bee disease and how apiarists manage their hives. Farmers have said the issue has been stoked by urban environmentalists, unfamiliar with agriculture practices.

Adding more fuel to the fire is a preliminary report also released Wednesday by the U.S. Environmental Protection agency that said neonics are a threat to some pollinators when used on or near certain crops such as citrus and cotton. It's one of four preliminary reports the U.S. agency plans.

Still another study, also released Wednesday, suggests using neonics is also financially beneficial to farmers.

The Health Canada report weighs the economic benefit to farmers nationally at between \$101.5 million and \$134 million

The bulk of that benefit would be in Ontario, particularly Southwestern Ontario, where corn and soybeans are the mainstay of the cash-crop economy.

- Corn farmers who use neonics add 3.2 per cent to 3.6 per cent to their revenue nationally — with most benefit in Ontario, but with more cost than benefit in Quebec.

- Soybean farmers who use neonics get 1.5 per cent to 2.1 per cent more revenue nationally because their fields yield more, that study says.

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Those numbers disprove environmentalists' claims that farmers are in the pockets of seed-chemical companies, Brock said. Producers "are not just using (pesticides) for the sake of using them," but because they have a measurable benefit, he said.

DeVries said seed treatments in general "are an excellent idea. It's just that this one . . . didn't work out."

The reports could give pause to other governments looking to restrict the use of neonicotinoids.

But in Ontario, neither DeVries nor Brock believes the provincial government will back down on its new rules that include a commitment to using neonics on 80 per cent less acreage by 2017.

THE REPORTS

- can be found at the Health Canada website hc-sc.gc.ca by searching the Consumer Product Safety and then the Pesticides and Pest Management tab.
- a full report on neonicotinoids is expected to be released by Jan. 18
- the public can comment on the documents and the findings until March 6.
- a final assessment of the risks of neonicotinoids by the Pest Management Regulatory Agency is expected sometime after December

SUMMARIES

- no potential risk to bees from use of seed treatments.
- a potential risk to bees was identified for some soil treatments. Bumblebees might be more sensitive to exposure than honeybees.
- potential risk from applying neonics to leaves of plants.
- applying to plant during bloom has low risk to bees based on current label restrictions.

ABOUT NEONICOTINOIDS

- Class of pesticides applied as coating on corn, soybean seeds
- Fight bug infestations before they can attack crops
- their role, or non-role, in bee deaths has been hotly debated.
- European Union has imposed a moratorium on neonic use
- Ontario is North America's first jurisdiction to restrict their use.