Manitoba Co-operator

The neonic debate: science or sensationalism?

Laying the blame for a collection of environmental issues at the feet of a single technology is very convenient, but hugely overly simplistic

August 5, 2014

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Bold, apocalyptic headlines make for great front-page news stories, there's no question. Unfortunately, when it comes to highly complex and scientific issues, these kinds of headlines usually do a disservice to the topic at hand.

Scientific research is filled with intricacies and rarely yields answers that can be conveyed in a single headline. Far too often in this day and age we're seeing sensationalism trump science. The issue of neonicotinoids (a type of insecticide) and bee health is a prime example of this.

Earlier this year, a study out of Harvard University claiming to show negative impacts of neonicotinoids on bees captured media attention across the globe. The media overwhelmingly concluded that neonicotinoids are at the heart of bee health challenges.

The Harvard study dramatically overexaggerated typical exposures of bees to neonics and made a link to colony collapse disorder that simply isn't supported by the evidence.

In June, a group calling itself the IUCN Task Force on Systemic Pesticides began a media tour touting the findings of its study into the decline of the global insect population. The polished news conferences, high-quality video and co-ordinated calls for action against pesticides by

known anti-pesticide activists made this look a lot more like a sophisticated public relations effort rather than meaningful scientific dialogue.

At the time of this media tour, the report had not yet been made publicly available. It seems to me to go against the ethical code of scientists to embark on a worldwide media tour promoting research findings without giving the scientific community an opportunity to validate the findings. This, however, did not stop the decisive and conclusive headlines about the impact of neonicotinoids on a number of creatures, including bees, other insects and birds.

To lay the blame for a collection of environmental issues at the feet of a single technology is very convenient, but hugely overly simplistic.

Activists lobbying to ban neonicotinoids — and other pesticides — continually call for independent research on the topic. While the pest control industry certainly welcomes new research on our products, it is naive to think that research done external to industry cannot be biased. Many of the so-called independent researchers looking at neonics have built their careers on reinforcing the message that pesticides are bad. Producing research that supports this message is what keeps the flow of research funding coming.

In Canada, pesticides are regulated by Health Canada's Pest Management Regulatory Agency (PMRA). We have one of the most rigorous scientific evaluation processes in the world. The PMRA reviews all available scientific data when assessing whether or not a pesticide is safe for both humans and the environment. This is a key point. The PMRA looks at all available research and makes its decision based on the weight of scientific evidence, not by cherry-picking individual studies. This is at the very heart of Canada's science-based regulatory system.

The plant science industry is steadfastly committed to the safe and responsible use of our products. Insecticide-treated seed is an important part of agricultural production, innovation and sustainability. It has been successfully used by Canadian farmers for about a decade, most notably in Western Canada where neonics are used to treat canola, and bee populations continue to thrive.

One need only look to Australia where the bee population is healthier than ever despite the widespread use of neonics. The reason? Likely because in Australia there's no varroa mite, the most pervasive bee-killing pest.

Bee health is undisputedly a topic of great importance. Our industry has taken a number of important steps to protect bee health both directly and in partnership with other stakeholders. This is an issue that requires collaboration and co-operation. To ensure the health of Canada's bee population as well as the continued success of our agricultural sector, it's critical that science prevail over sensationalism.

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