

## Ontario is looking to weaken pesticide rules, environmentalists say

---

**JEFF GRAY** QUEEN'S PARK REPORTER  
TORONTO  
PUBLISHED 3 HOURS AGO

---

1 COMMENTS

SHARE

---

Environmental groups say the Ontario government is proposing to weaken the province's restrictions on a class of agricultural pesticides that some scientific studies blame for large declines in the populations of bees and other insects.

A coalition that includes Environmental Defence and the Ontario Beekeepers Federation says proposed rule changes for neonicotinoids, or neonics for short, will make it easier for farmers to use them and harder for the government to track them.

But the Ontario government, farmer organizations and pesticide manufacturers who support the changes say they would reduce unnecessary paperwork and cut duplication by leaving most pesticide regulation to Ottawa.

Health Canada, after studying the effects on bees, stopped short of following the European Union and banning neonics. But it is considering whether to phase them out because of their effects on aquatic insects.

In a statement to be released on Thursday, the environmental groups also call Ontario's proposed changes "undemocratic," saying they are in omnibus legislation aimed at slashing "red tape" for businesses that also would allow dogs on pub patios and 24-hour drinking at international airports.

In a summary distributed last month when it unveiled the bill, the Progressive Conservative government said it was “proposing to maintain restrictions” on neonics, “with some administrative burden relief.” But environmentalists say the changes go much further.

“It’s just really troubling to see environmental protection regulations characterized as red tape,” said Lisa Gue, a senior researcher with the David Suzuki Foundation.

Studies have linked neonics to bee deaths, and shown that chronic exposure through pollen and water can limit bees’ ability to forage and navigate, raising alarms about the effects of a decline of such pollinators on the ecosystem. In response, the previous provincial Liberal government brought in new restrictions on neonic-coated seeds for corn and soybeans in 2015.

Those rules require farmers to take a pest-management course and consult professional pest advisers every three years. To get access to neonic-coated seeds, they must perform tests to show their soil is infested with grubs or worms, or document crop damage from these pests.

Under the proposed legislative and regulatory changes, farmers would still have to take a course, but they could then fill out a form declaring that their farm faces just one of several risk factors for pests. And they would have to apply for permission to use neonics only once, not every year.

They would not need to show their farm is actually infested. Risk factors that would allow them to qualify would include having property that is “sandy or silty,” with “hilly knolls,” or bordered by treelines, or if they declare their land is adjacent to “pasture, sod farm, parkland or a golf course.”

The proposals would also scrap rules that require seed vendors to keep copies of farmers’ pest-risk assessments and report annual sales data. Government data show a 38-per-cent reduction in acres planted with treated corn and soy seeds since 2014.

The proposed changes are intended to save costs: They would also scrap the province’s pesticide classification council and harmonize most of its pesticide

rules with those of the federal government – meaning Ontario would abide by Ottawa’s upcoming decision on neonics.

Chelsea Dolan, a spokeswoman for Ontario Environment Minister Jeff Yurek, said Health Canada has more resources to assess pesticides and added that only Ontario and Quebec have their own neonics rules.

“As these seeds are used less and less in Ontario, we are reducing paperwork for farmers with a proven need, while restricting access to farmers without,” Ms. Dolan said in an e-mail.

Keith Currie, president of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, said the old rules bogged farmers down with “onerous” paperwork. He said farmers know based on their crops and soil type whether they need neonics, and needn’t reapply every year. He also said the effects of neonics on bees were “blown out of proportion,” adding that Health Canada has not yet banned them.

CropLife Canada, which represents big pesticide manufacturers, told its members in an e-mail the changes would mean “if the farmer deems that he/she needs treated seed, they will get it.”

Pierre Petelle, CropLife’s president and chief executive, said the changes would eliminate a “paperwork nightmare” and rightly leave the ultimate decision on neonics to Ottawa. He called Ontario’s rules “a mess of a regulation ... that wasn’t really based on the science.”

*Our Morning Update and Evening Update newsletters are written by Globe editors, giving you a concise summary of the day’s most important headlines. [Sign up today.](#)*