

Health Canada changes course on neonics

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Reading Time: 3 minutes

Published: March 31, 2021

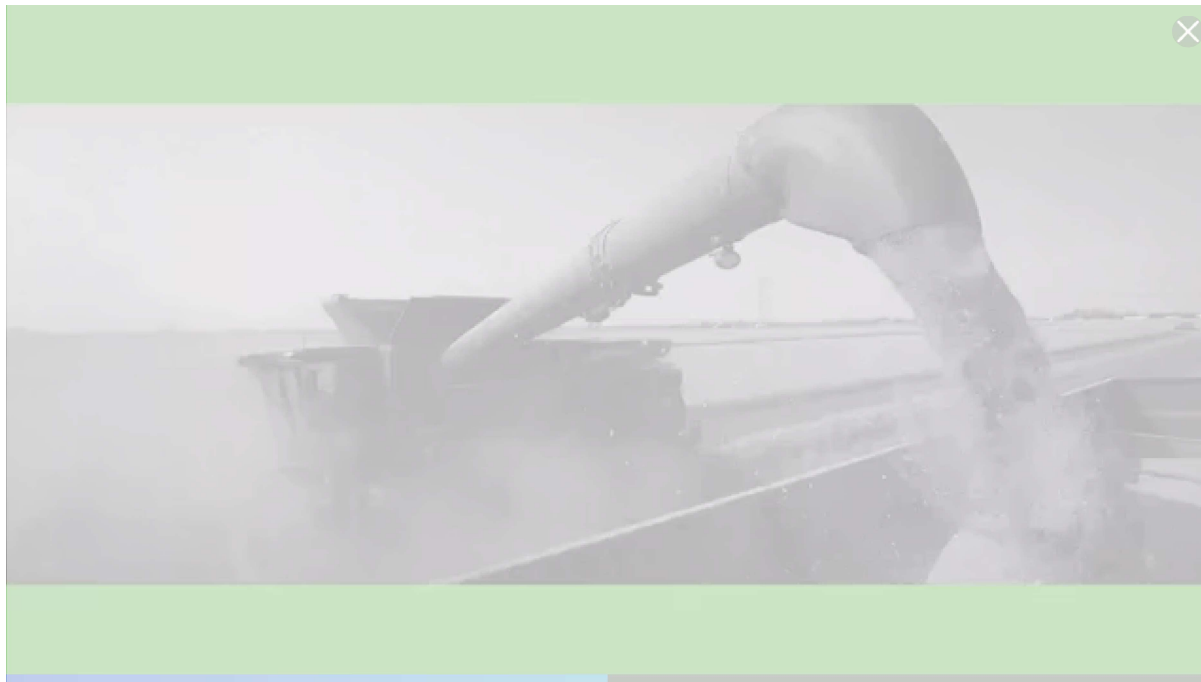
Crops, News



The final decision has been delayed several times, but today Health Canada's Pest Management Regulatory Agency announced that neonicotinoid insecticides are not a threat to aquatic insects when used as a seed treatment on canola and in many other instances.

"While we are still reviewing the full details of the special review decisions, we are pleased that the PMRA has affirmed that in many cases these important tools can be used without posing unacceptable risks to aquatic invertebrates," Pierre Petelle, president of CropLife Canada, said in an email.

"Unfortunately, in some cases — specifically in the horticulture sector — many important uses of these products will be restricted, and in some cases, removed entirely."



In 2018, Health Canada proposed to phase out all agricultural uses of thiamethoxam, a Syngenta product, and clothianidin, a Bayer insecticide.

Neonics, as they are known, are widely used in Canadian agriculture. They are applied as a seed treatment to most of the corn and canola seeds in Canada, and a portion of the soybean seeds. They are also applied to fruit, vegetables and berry crops.

PMRA continues to review the safety of imidacloprid, another Bayer neonics. It will make a decision on imidacloprid later this year.

In the summer of 2018, department scientists said the insecticides were accumulating in ponds, creeks and other water bodies near agricultural land. The concentrations of neonics were harmful to midges and mayflies and therefore posed a threat to the birds and other animals that rely on the insects for food.

“Current research shows that these pesticides are detected frequently in water bodies at levels that could be harmful to certain aquatic organisms,” Health Canada said in 2019.

“The department expects to report on its findings at the end of 2019.”

That decision was delayed a couple of times in 2020 and then pushed back to 2021, partly because of a huge volume of submissions to Health Canada regarding the safety of neonics.

“For this special review, Health Canada undertook significant engagement and consultation with industry, stakeholders, and Canadians, receiving more than 47,000 comments from the public through this process,” the department said in a news release.

The Canadian Canola Growers Association and Alberta Agriculture collected and analyzed water samples near canola fields in Western Canada to test the ponds, creeks and water bodies for the presence of neonics.

Both groups found tiny concentrations of neonics at levels below the threshold of risk to aquatic insects.

The PMRA incorporated the results into its decision.

“Based on these data it was determined that the risks to aquatic invertebrates resulting from chronic exposure following application of clothianidin under certain currently registered conditions are acceptable.”

Health Canada scientists came to the same conclusion about thiamethoxam.

The department’s willingness to look at additional information and back away from a neonic ban is encouraging, CropLife said.

There are no changes for use in canola but lower application rates in corn and soybeans. For thiamethoxam:

- The maximum seed treatment rate for field corn is reduced to 200 g active ingredient per 100 kg seed.
- The maximum seed treatment rate for soybean is reduced to 30 g a.i. per 100 kg seed.

For clothianidin:

- The maximum seed treatment rate for field corn is reduced to 150 g a.i. per 100 kg seed.

As well, Health Canada has cut the rates of seed treatment allowed for vegetable crops and reduced the allowable foliar rates on potatoes and other crops.

While CropLife is pleased that Health Canada changed its position on the two neonics, environmental groups are not.

Six groups, including the David Suzuki Foundation, slammed the decision.

“We are not convinced that tinkering with label restrictions will be effective in reducing concentrations of neonics in the environment. Certainly it will be less effective than the originally proposed ban,” said Charlotte Dawe, conservation and policy campaigner with the Wilderness Committee.

The PRMA decision for mitigation measures and label change, takes full effect in 24 months.

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