



## DAILY NEWS

## Industry, Advocates Spar Over Pesticides' Role In Threats To Bees' Health

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Industry groups and environmentalists are sparring over the role that controversial neonicotinoid pesticides have on bee health, with advocates urging EPA to expand its review of the substances to include impacts on other species while an industry consulting group is countering that a pest and not the chemicals are to blame for pollinator harms.

In a [Sept. 24 letter](#), a coalition of 17 environmental and consumer groups call for EPA to speed and broaden its review of neonicotinoids, which for most neonicotinoids is scheduled to take until 2018 or 2019 to complete. "We urge EPA to sweep even more broadly in its assessment and consider the effects of neonicotinoids on beneficial species of all varieties, as well as considering basic ecosystem sustainability, upon which all species ultimately depend, including humans," the letter says.

But the Center for Regulatory Effectiveness (CRE), which consults for industry groups, in a [Sept. 24 memo to federal officials](#), argues the varroa mite is primarily responsible for bee population declines.

CRE also argues that scientific evidence that neonicotinoids harm bees through sub-lethal adverse effects comes from poorly-designed studies that rely on unrealistic doses and exposure scenarios.

The dispute highlights issues that EPA and other agencies will have to weigh as they work on strategies for reducing pollinator health decline, with Obama seeking a comprehensive federal plan on the issue.

EPA and other agencies have been working to stem massive declines in bee populations seen since 2006 and have named neonicotinoid pesticides as one of several factors. Other causes include pathogens, such as the varroa mite, lack of genetic diversity and poor nutrition resulting from shrinking pollinator habitat.

Obama in a [June memorandum](#) created a new federal Pollinator Health Task Force to work on stemming pollinator declines by improving pollinator habitat, assessing how pesticides and other stressors contribute to pollinator declines and taking action where appropriate, including a call for EPA to assess neonicotinoids' effects.

The task force within 180 days of Obama's June 20 order must create a National Pollinator Health Strategy to better understand, prevent and recover pollinator losses, and to determine the relevant impacts from the various factors contributing to declines of bees and other pollinators. EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Secretary Thomas Vilsack are chairing the panel.

The memo also requires EPA, within 180 days, to assess risks from pesticides, including the controversial neonicotinoid class, to pollinators, and to take appropriate action to protect pollinators. It is unclear how EPA will meet the deadline for assessing neonicotinoids, since agency officials have said registration review of the substances, including their risks to pollinators, is currently underway and could last several more years.

In response to the memo, a group of 60 House lawmakers sent a [Sept. 30 letter to McCarthy](#) urging a change in a host of EPA policies in order to protect pollinators.

Among the requests is restricting or prohibiting the use of neonicotinoids on "bee-attractive" crops; requiring comprehensive new data collections ahead of registrations for new neonicotinoids; fully complying with Endangered Species Act (ESA) requirements to consult with other agencies on new neonicotinoids' impacts on species; and initiating ESA consultations for already-registered neonicotinoids.

### Regulatory Restrictions

Environmentalists have said the administration's pollinator plans, which largely call on federal agencies to improve bee habitat, do not go far enough because they stop short of calling for specific regulatory restrictions and other measures environmentalists are seeking to reduce the potential risks of pesticides to bees.

Their recent letter to EPA, which does not mention the varroa mite, argues that the call in the president's memo for EPA to review neonicotinoids within six months, backs advocates' long-standing claims that EPA's current timeline for completing registration review of neonicotinoids is inadequate to protect bees.

The groups that signed the letter -- including the Center for Food Safety, Food & Water Watch, the American Bird

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Conservancy and the Sierra Club -- also point to the president's June memo in calling on EPA to broaden reviews of neonicotinoid risks to consider other pollinators and additional pathways of exposure.

The "Memorandum recognizes, this is not just about domesticated honey bees," but also native pollinators, the groups say, adding that EPA should consider neonicotinoid risks to thousands of species, "ranging from bumblebees, wasps, moths, butterflies, flies and beetles, to hummingbirds, perching birds, bats and several other mammals, such as possums."

They also reiterate claims that EPA neonicotinoid reviews have not fully considered all routes of exposure, including through contaminated dust during planting, residual contamination in soils and contaminated ground and surface waters.

The groups urge EPA to consider the value of ecosystem services, such as pollination and natural pest control, which are threatened by neonicotinoid use, in assessments, and to adhere to an Endangered Species Act requirement to consult with federal wildlife officials on potential risks to listed species before registering products containing neonicotinoids.

The letter also calls on EPA to regulate neonicotinoid-treated seeds under the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA), by ending the agency's current interpretation that they are treated articles exempt from FIFRA regulation.

**Pending Legislation**

But industry officials say that claims neonicotinoids threaten pollinator health are based on faulty studies. Industry groups, including the pesticide producers coalition CropLife America are backing a recently introduced bill that would require EPA to expedite reviews of pesticide products designed to control varroa mites, a common bee parasite.

Rep. Austin Scott (R-GA) Sept. 10 introduced H.R. 5447, which would amend FIFRA to require EPA to take several steps aimed at controlling varroa mites, including faster reviews of pesticides that target the parasite or reduce resistance to existing miticides and reports to Congress on the availability of pesticides that protect bees from the mites.

The CRE letter, sent to EPA and USDA, echoes industry concerns that pests and not neonicotinoids are to blame for pollinator declines. They letter cites congressional testimony from USDA researchers calling the varroa mite a honey bee plague, and reports of other governments, including New Zealand and Australia that find the pest rather than neonicotinoids poses the greatest risk to bees. And the CRE faults one European regulatory agency which has found risks from certain neonicotinoids, despite acknowledging incomplete risk assessments and data gaps.

The varroa mite is "by far, the greatest threat to bee health," CRE says, adding that "Neonicotinoids used according to regulatory requirements pose little threat to bees."

In the memo, CRE cites the USDA researcher's April 29 testimony to the House Agriculture Committee that the varroa mite is "a modern honey bee plague . . . responsible for the deaths of massive numbers of colonies," and says that testimony is consistent with the findings of regulators from other countries.

The report notes that Australia, where varroa mites are not present, does not suffer collapse of bee colonies even though neonicotinoids are used in that country. In New Zealand, the CRE says, reports have shown bee colonies coexisted with neonicotinoid use for years until varroa mites were introduced, resulting in the near disappearance of wild bees from part of the island within four years.

CRE also challenges the European Food Safety Authority's (EFSA) finding that three neonicotinoids pose risk to bees, despite acknowledging incomplete risks assessments, containing uncertainties and data gaps. CRE says EFSA's determination is based on precautionary principle, a vague tenet which ignores "evidence-based reasoning," and which is not a sustainable method for protecting public health.

CRE also cites the findings of the United Kingdom's Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, which has found that laboratory studies showing sublethal effects to bees rely on unrealistic doses and do not provide variety in bee diet, and that risks to bees from neonicotinoids as currently used are low. -- *Dave Reynolds* ([dreynolds@iwppnews.com](mailto:dreynolds@iwppnews.com))

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