

## DAILY NEWS

# House GOP Questions EPA Coordination With Agencies On Pollinator Plan

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House Republicans are questioning the adequacy of EPA's coordination with other agencies on a plan to protect pollinators' health, citing the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) criticisms of an EPA study that found the use of neonicotinoids -- blamed by advocates for bee deaths -- have negligible benefits for soybean production.

In addition to citing USDA's criticisms of the study, Republican lawmakers are also citing the U.S. Fish and Wildlife's July 2014 announcement it will phase out neonicotinoids in National Wildlife Refuges by 2016, as another sign that federal agencies are acting alone to address risks to pollinators rather than in coordination.

Rep. Rodney Davis (R-IL), chair of the House Agriculture Committee's biotechnology, horticulture and research panel, said at a May 13 hearing that there are concerns about the impact that inadequate coordination could have on the forthcoming pollinator strategy that EPA and USDA are taking the lead on with [a joint task force](#).

"We have a concern that there isn't communication between the two agencies co-chairing the pollinator health task force," said Davis. "We see a disagreement between agencies that are supposed to be working together."

The task force is slated to release in the coming weeks its plan to implement President Obama's June 20 memo ordering development of a strategy to protect bee health. The memo calls for stemming pollinator declines by improving bee habitat, assessing the risks of pesticides and other stressors to bees, and acting where appropriate.

Several months after the president's memo, EPA unexpectedly released its [Oct. 15 analysis](#) finding seeds treated with neonicotinoids fail to improve soybean yields compared to no pesticide use. The report also backed environmentalists' long-standing claims that treated seeds are used before pest pressure is present.

The agency's controversial analysis of the "Benefits of Neonicotinoid Seed Treatments to Soybean Production" has become a focal point of environmentalists' calls for EPA to restrict or ban neonicotinoids, with advocates arguing the pesticides are harming pollinators without helping farmers.

But industry, and more recently USDA, have faulted EPA's analysis, calling it a preliminary review that fails to adequately weigh all the benefits of neonicotinoid treated seeds. Pesticide producers argued that the analysis was based on insufficient data and failed to consider many of the benefits of treated seeds.

House Republicans at the agriculture subcommittee hearing highlighted [an April 6 letter](#) that USDA sent to EPA faulting the controversial study as an indication the two agencies are not cooperating sufficiently, potentially hindering the pollinator strategy.

USDA said it disagrees with EPA's finding that neonicotinoid-treated seeds fail to improve soybean yields, and argues the review is a preliminary analysis that fails to adequately consider benefits, and does not comport with federal Information Quality Act guidelines on the quality of information circulated by federal agencies.

In a letter sent to EPA alongside the comments, acting USDA Chief Economist Robert Johansson says, "EPA released the report regarding soybean seed treatment without additional consideration of other crops or to USDA cautions about releasing a premature assessment of the costs and benefits of such seed treatments."

### Republicans' Concerns

During the House subcommittee hearing, Davis and several other Republican lawmakers cited the letter in arguing that the two agencies leading the federal response to pollinator declines should better coordinate.

They also raised other concerns, including that the varroa mite, a common pest, is the primary driver of bee declines rather than pesticides and cautioned EPA against making decisions before science is complete.

"EPA is moving to rule before the studies are done," Rep. Ted Yoho (R-FL) said, noting USDA's assertion in the April 6 letter that EPA's conclusion that treated seeds fail to improve yields resulted from a study the agency says did not consider adequate data. "How do we get you guys on the same page and working toward the same goal?"

EPA toxics chief Jim Jones testified that EPA is weighing comments received on the benefits analysis, including the USDA letter, as EPA works toward a final assessment that may be used to mitigate risks.

He also noted that EPA is required by law to coordinate with USDA before releasing a rule, though the benefits analysis was not a regulation. "We're committed to basing our decisions on science and following the law," Jones said. "And we collaborate extensively with the department of agriculture."

USDA's Johansson testified that there is "great communication and collaboration" between agencies on the inter-agency task force crafting the federal strategy. And he downplayed disagreement between the two agencies on EPA's analysis of the benefits of neonicotinoid treated seeds in soybean production.

Summing up the letter, he said, EPA should have better considered regional variations in its benefits analysis, as well as annual fluctuations in crop yields. Through the comments, USDA sought to inform the agency of available public information that could strengthen the review.

He also said USDA will have a chance to follow up with EPA as that agency moves forward with revising the benefits analysis.

In the April 6 comments, USDA argues EPA's conclusion the treated seeds fail to improve yields is not supported by adequate data or analysis, and that the study failed to consider all the advantages of seed treatments over pesticide spraying. USDA also argues the study underestimated benefits, including lower risks of mortality of non-target species, including beneficial insects like bees.

"Using seed treatments minimizes the exposure of non-target insect populations to active ingredients included in foliar sprays. Such potential benefits to those insect populations have not been included in this analysis," the letter says.

The department also echoed industry arguments that EPA's conclusion defies economic principles. "Given the pace of adoption of neonicotinoid seed treatments particularly in some regions of the country, it is clear that there are economic benefits to using those seed treatments." USDA says.

USDA's comments also contend that EPA conclusions can have a significant impact on the market and so the review should have been subject to review by USDA and the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) before being released for public comment. "EPA's use of unpublished and sparse data to make overly broad conclusions about the efficacy and economic value of neonicotinoid seed treatments does not comport with OMB's Information Quality Guidelines" or EPA's own information quality guidance, USDA says.

The assertion echoes December comments from the Center for Regulatory Effectiveness, which consults for industry groups, which argued EPA's conclusions that neonicotinoid-treated seeds provide negligible benefits for soybean yields and are commonly used when pests are not present, are based on inappropriately manipulated or unpublished data and defy economic principles. -- *Dave Reynolds* ([dreynolds@iwppnews.com](mailto:dreynolds@iwppnews.com))

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