

EPA Registers New Pesticide To Fight 'Devastating' Honeybees Parasite

Posted: March 18, 2015

EPA has approved a previously registered pesticide for use against a parasite that harms bees, a move the agency calls critical to protecting bees and consistent with President Obama's memo on improving pollinator health, though a beekeeper group says targeting parasites is insufficient and limits on bee-toxic pesticides are also needed.

EPA March 10 registered oxalic acid to target varroa mites, which EPA calls "a serious and devastating pest of honeybee colonies," according to [EPA's registration document](#).

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) requested the registration of oxalic acid, which is currently used in Canada and Europe to target varroa mites and which EPA had previously registered as an anti-microbial pesticide until registrants voluntarily canceled their registrations in 1994.

The registration comes as EPA and USDA are investigating the massive decline of honey bees and other pollinators seen since 2006 and have named both the varroa mite and pesticides as among the factors in the decline, spurring debate between environmentalists and pesticide producers over which is the primary culprit.

The two agencies are leading [a federal Pollinator Health Task Force](#) that is expected to soon release a new strategy for implementing Obama's June 20 memo on stemming declines in pollinators by improving habitat, assessing how pesticides and other stressors contribute to pollinator declines and taking action where appropriate.

The executive memo also instructs EPA to expedite review of registration applications for new products targeting pests that harm pollinators, and includes a call for EPA to assess potential risks of neonicotinoid pesticides to pollinators.

Environmental and beekeeping groups have argued that neonicotinoids, systemic pesticides that are taken up into plants' pollen, nectar and stem, are the driving factor in pollinator declines, and are pushing EPA to ban or restrict use of the substances pending further study, and also for EPA to expedite its ongoing registration review of neonicotinoids.

In the March 10 registration document, EPA says varroa mites feed on developing bees and reduce their life span, and that if an infested bee colony is not treated, it will likely die. Varroa mites also transmit numerous honeybee viruses, and have quickly developed resistance to registered chemicals.

'Nationwide Problem'

To demonstrate what it calls "a nationwide problem," EPA notes that in recent years state regulators have sought more emergency exemptions to use unregistered pesticides on varroa mites than for any other pest. From 1999 to 2014, EPA issued state regulators more than 720 such exemptions, adding that in some years more than 40 states have sought an exemption.

"The nationwide scope of these exemptions exceeds anything ever authorized for any other pest, agricultural or otherwise," EPA says in the registration document.

Although beekeeper advocates are backing the registration, they argue that restrictions on bee-toxic pesticides are also needed.

In [comments posted to a federal website March 11](#), the Pollinator Stewardship Council (PSC) calls oxalic acid an "important tool in managing the health of honey bees" but says bees also need pesticide-free forage for a diverse and natural food supply.

"This is not the solution to honey bee health declines," according to the PSC comments. "Honey bees would be healthier if the levels of bee toxic pesticides were reduced, and if [pesticides were] applied when they least affected honey bees."

The group reiterated its call for expedited study and restrictions on neonicotinoid pesticides in [a March 12 letter to the federal task force](#), which is expected to issue a strategy for implementing the president's memo in the coming days or weeks.

In the letter, PSC urges the task force "to accelerate the review of neonicotinoids, enacting a moratorium . . . on their use until longitudinal studies have been completed."

Industry groups, meanwhile, have argued that varroa mites are the primary culprit in bee declines and 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 varroa mite is "by far, the greatest threat to bee health," the Center for Regulatory Effectiveness, a group that consults for industry, says in a Sept. 24 memo to federal officials. "Neonicotinoids used according to regulatory requirements pose little threat to bees." -- *Dave Reynolds* (dreynolds@iwnews.com)