

OFA looking for science-based solutions to bee issue

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The recent death of bees in record numbers continues to concern scientists, beekeepers, farmers and regulatory bodies alike. Ontario's bee population has taken a significant hit over the past few years, a troubling trend since so much of agriculture relies on bees and pollinators. This is an issue of concern for Canadian farmers, who rely on the strength of the land, water and soil and pollinators to keep crops and pastures healthy.

While there is considerable speculation on what exactly is causing bee mortality, no single reason has been identified conclusively. An emerging theory is that the cause or a contributor to bee deaths is neonicotinoids, a class of insecticide commonly used in Ontario as seed treatment on corn and soybeans. The Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA) maintains our position on this troubling issue and is calling for sound science-based solutions by Health Canada's Pest Management Regulatory Agency (PMRA). OFA knows all our members are affected by this issue in one way or another, and unfortunately there isn't an easy answer to solve this complex problem. The Ontario consultation process continues on this issue and OFA is participating in industry discussions through the Ontario Bee Health Working Group.

As farmers, we need to rely on sound science to make our decisions. PMRA continues its work to find the answers to the outstanding scientific questions and is currently re-evaluating the uses of neonicotinoid insecticides. The regulatory body has stated their concern with current agricultural practices related to the use of neonicotinoid treated corn and soybean seed, saying that current practices are not sustainable. We are assured PMRA applies a science-based approach to the regulation of all pesticides and eagerly await the results of its evaluation that is expected to help everyone better understand and manage the potential risks these pesticides may pose to the long-term health of bees.

PMRA recently produced a notice of intent on neonicotinoid exposure to bees and invites stakeholders and the public to submit written comments on the issue. This consultation is open for a 90-day comment period and interested parties are encouraged to provide written comments by Dec. 12. Within the same document, PMRA has identified protective measures farmers can use for the 2014 planting season to create a more sustainable environment for bees and pollinators. OFA members can review these recommendations and submit their own comments by visiting Health Canada's website.

OFA was pleased to hear Premier and Minister of Agriculture and Food Kathleen Wynne recently committed more than \$700,000 to research initiatives on bee health in 2013 and annual funding of over \$100,000 to the Ontario Beekeepers' Association. In her announcement, she said the province continues to address broader bee health issues, including those related to neonicotinoids, through a range of other actions, including the funding and deploying a team of 21 bee inspectors and specialists to support bee health across Ontario.

For generations, the development and overwhelming success of Ontario's agricultural industry has relied on science and technology. What we need once again is a sustainable solution, built on sound science and applied by everyone in the agriculture industry.