



Saving the bees (and ourselves)

Illinois legislator looks to limit use of type of pesticides linked to pollinator die-offs that pose threat to food supply

by Illinois Rep. Will Guzzardi (will@repguzzardi.com)

Fruit doesn't just grow on trees. I know it might seem that way, but fruit trees can't grow on their own. They rely on bees for pollination in order to grow and propagate.

In fact, pollinators are a crucial part of the entire Midwest's economy, including in my home state of Illinois — our key cash crops include apples, melons and peaches, all of which rely on pollinators in order to grow.

Here's the problem: Bee populations are collapsing. For the last decade, winter honeybee deaths have been considerably higher than sustainable levels.

In the second half of the last decade, a phenomenon known as colony collapse disorder struck bee populations around the world, causing major losses and threatening these pollinators that make our food system work.

While scientists are not certain what has caused these troubling rates of bee die-offs, one likely culprit is the use of a new type of pesticides

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known as neonicotinoids, or "neonics" for short. Neonics are known as systemic pesticides, because they act not just on the surface of a plant but throughout its entire body — fruit, flowers, roots, leaves and all. This makes them particularly effective against pests that bore into trees (which can't be reached by sprays).

But more and more research is suggesting that neonics are contributing to the steep mortality rates of bees.

The effects of pesticides are notoriously hard to study in labs, but studies in France and Britain and out of the Harvard School of Public Health have provided strong evidence that neonics are doing harm to bees.

At high doses, these pesticides kill bees outright. But even at lower levels of exposure, the pesticides seem to have what's called "sublethal effects" on bees.

That is: small doses of neonics appear to be messing around with the nervous systems of bees, which makes them forget to take care of themselves through the winter months.

Scientists believe these effects are contributing to the much-higher-than-expected death rates of pollinators in recent years.

The mounting pressure from this research has led a number of corporate actors, including Home Depot and Lowe's, to agree to phase out these kinds of pesticides in the coming years.

Minnesota, Ontario in forefront of legislative efforts to protect pollinators

Pollinators, of which bees are the most common type, play an irreplaceable role in agriculture and food production. As collapsing bee populations over the last decade have generated increasing concern, states and provinces in the Midwest have begun taking steps to address the issue.

In July 2015, the Canadian province of Ontario became the first jurisdiction in North America to set rules protecting bees and other pollinators. The rules aim to reduce the number of acres planted with neonicotinoid-treated corn and soybean seeds by 80 percent by 2017. According to the province, the regulations

- ensure that neonicotinoid-treated seeds are used only when needed and when pests are present;
- require users to be trained in integrated pest-management methods that protect pollinators; and
- set requirements for the sale and use of neonicotinoid-treated seeds.

This summer, Minnesota Gov. Mark Dayton issued an executive Order (16-07) requiring the state to take actions to reverse the decline in populations of bees and other pollinators. According to the governor's office, these actions include:

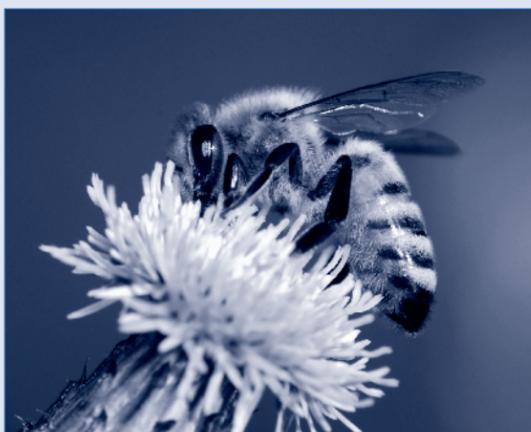
- requiring verification that neonicotinoid pesticides are used only due to imminent threat of significant crop loss;
- reviewing pesticide product labels and implementing state-specific restrictions on the products' use, as well as increasing enforcement of label requirements for pesticides that are acutely toxic to pollinators; and
- developing and promoting best-management practices to protect pollinator health in the state.

Other actions taken in Minnesota in recent years include passage of HF 976 in 2013 and HF 3172 in 2014.

HF 976 directed the state Department of Agriculture to develop best-management practices that protect pollinators by providing habitat necessary for their survival, as well as to train pesticide applicators and agricultural inspectors in those practices.

The bill also required the agriculture commissioner to submit to the Legislature a pollinator report that includes criteria for a special review of neonicotinoid pesticides registered for use in the state, as well as proposals to establish a pollinator bank to preserve species diversity; to create and enhance pollinator nesting and foraging habitat; and to establish pollinator reserves or refuges.

HF 3172 authorized the Department of Agriculture to punish violations of the state's pesticide control law protecting pollinators. That 2014 law also called for the state to assemble a group of experts to investigate pollinator deaths and illnesses, as well as to compensate bee owners up to \$20,000 per year for bee colony losses due to pesticide use consistent with the pesticide's label.



States can be leaders in saving bees

States can be a leader in this important environmental and economic area as well. In Illinois, I've proposed legislation, the Saving Illinois Pollinators Act, that would prohibit the use of neonics on public lands owned or operated by the state.

This act would not affect privately owned farmland. Instead, the state would take the lead, making sure lands held in the public trust don't use chemicals that erode the common good.

Because while the actions of some industry leaders are terrific steps forward, we can't simply trust the private sector to regulate itself. Protecting the health and welfare of Illinoisans is one of state government's central missions, and we can't have a healthy and prosperous state if we're poisoning the insects that keep our plants alive.

Fruit does grow on Illinois trees, for now.

If we want it to keep growing, we need to protect our pollinators, and this proposed legislation would be a great place to start. ★

Rep. Will Guzzardi, a Democrat from Chicago, was first elected to the Illinois House of Representatives in 2014. He also is a 2016 graduate of CSG Midwest's Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development.

Submissions welcome

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