

AMERICAN FORUM: The "buzz" about bees

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By Lex Horan

Although the "buzz" about bee declines makes headlines, excites public concern and warrants a White House Task Force on the Health of Honey Bees and Other Pollinators, bees are still in jeopardy.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) have failed to act with force on one of the key causes of pollinator declines: neonicotinoid pesticides.

Advertisement As the time approaches for the White House Task Force to announce its decision, it's more important than ever that the EPA and USDA act transparently to protect honey bees from pesticides.

Neonicotinoid pesticides are a key driver in bee declines, affecting bees' immune systems, navigation, reproduction and foraging, even at low doses. Last year, 29 scientists from the International Union for Conservation of Nature reviewed 800 studies from two decades of research. These researchers found that the evidence is overwhelmingly clear: Neonicotinoids have adverse effects on bees, and the current level of use of these pesticides is unsustainable.

If they're so harmful to bees, how did neonicotinoids get on the market? In the U.S., neonics were originally approved for use through a loophole called "conditional registration." Conditional registration allows pesticides to go to market even when the pesticide manufacturer can't provide the necessary research on the chemical's impact. Sixty-five percent of pesticides now on the market were approved through this process.

In 2010, a leaked EPA memo brought this problem to light. The memo, written in 2003, showed that Bayer had submitted flawed science in the registration process for a neonicotinoid called clothianidin. The memo revealed that EPA knew that the research was flawed, but approved clothianidin anyway.

What's happened to clothianidin since this memo became public in 2010? It has become one of the top-selling insecticides in the United States and around the world. There is not enough accountability to ensure that our federal agencies act swiftly when a problem emerges after a conditional registration, and too often, the product remains on the shelf.

Another shortcoming in transparency arises from the primary use of neonicotinoids as seed treatments, pesticide coatings pre-applied to seeds before farmers buy them. Of the 200 million acres of U.S. farmland treated with neonicotinoids, 95 percent had neonicotinoids applied via coated seeds. But remarkably, seed coatings aren't tracked or regulated like other uses of pesticides, because of another EPA loophole that exempts "treated articles" from regulation. This makes it quite difficult for lawmakers and researchers to know where, and in what quantities, neonic-treated seeds are planted. This is critical information that could help illuminate correlations between neonicotinoid use and bee losses.

Though the EPA is responsible for ensuring that pesticides approved for use don't harm bees, the agency may be considering relinquishing this responsibility back to the states, calling for individual state "pollinator protection plans" instead of a comprehensive change in federal pesticide policy to protect bees. Unfortunately, these state plans would likely put the onus on beekeepers and state agencies that lack the resources to implement truly protective plans.

This month, our federal decision-makers are nearing another key decision. The White House task force on pollinator health, co-chaired by the USDA and EPA, is poised to release its plan to deal with pollinator declines. The EPA has an opportunity to correct errors it made in registering neonicotinoids by restricting or suspending their use nationwide.

Though EPA recently announced it won't allow new uses of some neonicotinoids, there is work left to be done. The numerous bee-harming products already on the market will remain in use. And EPA has already approved two new systemic insecticides in the past year and that are not technically classified as neonics, although they pose the same hazards to bees. New products like these would not be subject to the moratorium.

We rely on EPA to protect pollinators from pesticides and preserve their important role within our food system. We urge the EPA and the White House pollinator task force to restrict or suspend neonicotinoid pesticides through a transparent process. It's time to maximize public accountability and minimize the influence that pesticide companies exert behind closed doors.

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Horan is an organizer with Pesticide Action Network North America (PAN). PAN is a member of the [OpenTheGovernment.org](#) coalition.

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