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Scientists, Beekeepers, Farmers Seek to Take Bee-Killing Pesticides off Store Shelves, Label Plants and Seeds

Pollinator Protection Act would reduce use of neonicotinoid pesticides; scientists say evidence of harm warrants attention now

Annapolis, MD (February 10, 2016) – Scientists, beekeepers and farmers will join public health, food and environmental advocates to testify before the Maryland House of Delegates Environment and Transportation committee in favor of the Pollinator Protection Act (Senate Bill 198/House Bill 211) this afternoon. The Act would restrict consumer use of neonicotinoid (aka “neonics”) pesticides to ensure they would be available for sale only to certified applicators, farmers or veterinarians. It would also require that any plants, seeds or nursery stock treated with neonics include an informational label or signage in close proximity.

Numerous studies confirm that neonics contribute to bee mortality, as well as to declines in native pollinators, including birds and butterflies.

“The Pollinator Protection Act is a common-sense solution to a big problem,” said Delegate Anne Healey (District 22), the bill’s lead sponsor in the House. “By taking responsible steps to protect our pollinators, we will be better able to preserve our food supply and our beekeeping industry in Maryland.”

Bees pollinate 71 of the 100 crops that make up 90 percent of the world’s food supply. Many fruits and vegetables, including apples, blueberries, strawberries, carrots and broccoli, as well as almonds and coffee, rely on bees.

“Last year, Maryland beekeepers lost 61 percent of their hives,” said Bonnie Raindrop, the Legislative Committee Chair of the Central Maryland Beekeepers Association. “These kinds of losses are staggering and unsustainable. Honey bees and other pollinators are responsible for one out of every three bites of food we eat. Our food supply and our public health are in deep trouble unless we do something.”
From 2014-2015, Maryland beekeepers’ hive losses were about twice the national average and far more than is typical in a year. This is not a one-time problem – since 2006, beekeepers have lost an average of 30 percent of their hives.

“A preponderance of evidence shows neonics’ negative impacts on bees,” said Dr. April Boulton, Ph.D, Director of the Environmental Biology Program at Hood College. “Neonics kill insect pests by harming their nervous systems and, unfortunately, they have also been shown to harm beneficial pollinators, such as bees. And while neonics can directly kill bees, they also impact their cognitive abilities and weaken their immune systems, including making them more susceptible to diseases and infestations, such as Varroa mites.”

Maryland honeybee pollination directly supports the agriculture industry in the state and is valued at more than $26 million annually. Advocates say the bill would help bees and other pollinators by curbing the pervasive use of neonic pesticides.

Neonics are one of the most widely used class of insecticides – and that use continues to grow. Neonicotinoids and fipronil currently account for approximately one third (in monetary terms in 2010) of the world insecticide market. Consumers often overuse neonics. One study found that products approved for home and garden use may be applied at up to 120 higher rates than what is approved for agricultural uses.

Cleo Braver, of Cottingham Farm in Talbot County, planted more tomato plants in 2015 than she had ever planted, yet had the fewest tomatoes.

"Even a 156-acre farm such as ours cannot shield the honey bees, bumblebees and other wild pollinators we rely on for pollination of our crops," said Braver. “They can travel several miles while foraging and can visit – at their peril – nearby sunflowers, milkweed, clover, buckwheat, vegetable transplants and ‘bee-friendly’ plants that have been treated with neonicotinoids or grown from treated seeds. Yet, there are other strategies and products that can be used instead of neonicotinoids to manage pests, all of which are far less toxic.”

The Pollinator Protection Act was first introduced in the Maryland General Assembly last year and gained a vast amount of support from the public. An OpinionWorks poll of 562 randomly selected Maryland registered voters found that 81 percent of voters supported the proposal to label nursery plants and 78 percent of Maryland voters favored restricting consumer use of this type of pesticides.

In addition to harming bees and other pollinators, neonics harm aquatic life and have been linked to death of molting blue crabs. A recent U.S. Geological Survey found 59 percent of all streams sampled nationwide had detectable levels of neonic contamination – including sampling from the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

Ahead of today’s bill hearing, advocates released a short video, “Give Bees a Chance,” to encourage Marylanders to support the Pollinator Protection Act.

View the fact sheet for more information.

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The Smart on Pesticides Maryland coalition works to protect Marylanders and the natural systems we depend upon from the toxic impacts of pesticides. The coalition includes more than 75 organizations, and institutions representing communities, businesses, health care providers, farmers, environmentalists, Waterkeepers, interfaith congregants as well as environmental justice, public health and wildlife advocates.