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Beekeepers, Advocates Say State’s Pollinator Protection Plan Needs Improvement

Plan is Part of Federal Actions to Address Pollinator Decline; Maryland Department of Agriculture Accepting Public Comments until July 25

Annapolis, MD (July 18, 2016) – A coalition of scientists, beekeepers and farmers working with public health, food and environmental advocates says the Maryland Department of Agriculture (MDA)’s proposed Managed Pollinator Protection Plan does not do enough to protect bees and other pollinators. The Managed Pollinator Protection Plan was proposed in response to an order from President Obama.

In its public comments, the coalition raises a number of concerns about deficiencies in Maryland’s plan and how it might be improved. The significant inadequacies of the plan include its lack of regulatory actions, little mention of the impact of pesticides on bee health and a lack of representative stakeholder input.

Advocates also point out that the plan has no provision for new funding, programs or regulations to accomplish any of its proposed protections for pollinators, but depends entirely on voluntary adherence to its guidelines.

“It’s ironic that just as Maryland has become a national leader in restricting pesticides that harm and kill bees, the Department of Agriculture puts forward a pollinator protection plan that does not adequately address pesticides,” said Bonnie Raindrop of the Central Maryland Beekeepers Association.

In the 2016 legislative session, the Maryland General Assembly became the first legislature in the country to pass a consumer restriction on neonicotinoid pesticides (“neonics”), which are shown to be particularly harmful to bees and other pollinators. A similar bill was enacted in Connecticut prior to Governor Hogan’s decision to allow Maryland’s Pollinator Protection Act to become law without his signature.

“This plan reads more like a compilation of suggestions instead of common sense, regulatory actions by the state,” said Dr. April Boulton, Ph.D, Hood College. “It also fails to fully explain the negative impacts of pesticides, especially neonicotinoid pesticides, which are proven to kill and harm bees and other pollinators.”
Honey bees and other pollinators are critical to the agriculture industry and our food supply. Recently, there has been a national movement to protect pollinators and restrict harmful pesticides after scientists, beekeepers and advocates highlighted a staggering amount of beehive losses. MDA’s proposed plan only describes a 41 percent “winter loss” of beehives, but annual losses in Maryland reached 61 percent in 2014-2015, according to the Bee Informed Partnership (BIP) and USDA.

The coalition also noted that the stakeholder committee that designed the plan had insufficient representation of beekeepers, organic and produce farmers and independent scientists and entomologists with expertise on risk factors for bees. Of the 70 stakeholders, only 11 were beekeepers and only two were farmers, and neither the organic farming community nor the Eastern Shore farming community were represented at all.

“This plan is in need of significant improvements and more input from experts if we are to proactively protect bees and other pollinators in the future,” said Ruth Berlin, executive director of the Maryland Pesticide Education Network. “To ensure transparency, we hope MDA will respond to our suggestions in a public fashion, just as if this plan were a new regulation. I encourage Marylanders to review the plan and provide their own comments.”

In 2014, President Obama issued a memorandum calling on federal agencies to increase and coordinate their efforts to improve bee health by developing an integrated strategy. The memorandum directed the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to engage states to develop Managed Pollinator Protection Plans in order to mitigate the risk of pesticides to bees and other managed pollinators. Each state is developing its own plan.

Comments about the plan will be accepted through July 25 and can be emailed to pollinator.protection@maryland.gov or by calling 410-841-5710.

View the coalition’s full comments to MDA here.

The Smart on Pesticides Maryland coalition, spearheaded by Maryland Pesticide Education Network, 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. Members of the Smart on Pesticides coalition worked to help pass the 2016 Pollinator Protection Act in Maryland.