Europe Bans Certain Pesticides, USA Just Keeps Looking, Bees Keep Dying

Curious Cat Science and Engineering Blog

For years the bee colony collapse disorder has been showing the difficulty of the scientific inquiry process. And that difficulty often becomes more difficult if interests with lots of money at stake want to block certain conclusions.

One-Third of U.S. Honeybee Colonies Died Last Winter, Threatening Food Supply [1]
Multiple factors — pesticides, fungicides, parasites, viruses and malnutrition — are believed to cause the losses, which were officially announced today by a consortium of academic researchers, beekeepers and Department of Agriculture scientists. "We're getting closer and closer to the point where we don't have enough bees in this country to meet pollination demands," said entomologist Dennis vanEngelstorp of the University of Maryland, who led the survey documenting the declines.

Beekeepers lost 31 percent of their colonies in late 2012 and early 2013, roughly double what's considered acceptable attrition through natural causes. The losses are in keeping with rates documented since 2006, when beekeeper concerns prompted the first nationwide survey of honeybee health. Hopes raised by drop in rates of loss to 22 percent in 2011-2012 were wiped out by the new numbers.
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Most losses reported in the latest survey, however, don't actually fit the CCD profile. And though CCD is largely undocumented in western Europe, honeybee losses there have also been dramatic. In fact, CCD seems to be declining, even as total losses mount. The honeybees are simply dying.

"Even if CCD went away, we'd still have tremendous losses," said entomologist Diana Cox-Foster at Pennsylvania State University. "CCD losses are like the straw that breaks the camel's back. The system has many other issues."

EU member states vote ushers in continent-wide suspension of neonicotinoid pesticides [2]
The commission proposed the suspension after the EFSA concluded in January that three neonicotinoids – thiamethoxam, clothianidin and imidacloprid – posed an unnacceptable risk to bees. The three will be banned from use for two years on flowering crops such as corn, oilseed rape and sunflowers, upon which bees feed.
A spokesman for Bayer Cropscience said: "Bayer remains convinced neonicotinoids are safe for bees, when used responsibly and properly … clear scientific evidence has taken a back-seat in the decision-making process."

Prof Simon Potts, a bee expert at the University of Reading, said: "The ban is excellent news for pollinators. The weight of evidence from researchers clearly

points to the need to have a phased ban of neonicotinoids. There are several alternatives to using neonicotinoids and farmers will benefit from healthy pollinator populations as they provide substantial economic benefits to crop pollination."

Neonicotinoids have been widely used for more than decade and are less harmful than some of the sprays they replaced, but scientific studies have increasingly linked them to poor bee health.

Many observers, including the National Farmers' Union, accept that EU regulation is inadequate, as it only tests on honeybees and not the wild pollinators that service 90% of plants. The regulatory testing also only considers short-term effects and does not consider the combined effects of multiple pesticides. The chemical industry has warned that a ban on neonicotinoids would lead to the return of older, more harmful pesticides and crop losses but campaigners point out this has not happened during temporary suspensions in France, Italy and Germany and that the use of natural pest predators and crop rotation can tackle problems.

The bee deaths continue to provide an excellent view on the challenges with seeking to learn what is going wrong environmentally. The complexity given our current tools and knowledge makes finding answers difficult. It seems more and more that economic and political influence are making the problem even harder.

On lesson, it seems to me, is that it is wise to err on the side of caution. When we don't understand the risks we are taking we should take fewer risks. Taking risks we don't understand is dangerous. In general I believe we are too cavalier about the risks we take environmentally and with our own bodies (drugs etc.) [3].

We have posted on this topic here for years: Study of the Colony Collapse Disorder Continues as Bee Colonies Continue to Disappear (2012) [4] – Bye Bye Bees (2006) [5] – Bee Colonies Continue to Collapse (2010) [6] – Virus Found to be One Likely Factor in Bee Colony Colapse Disorder (2007) [7] – Germany Bans Chemicals Linked to Bee Deaths (2008) [8]

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[1] http://www.wired.com/wiredscience/2013/05/winter-honeybee-losses/
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