



Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont

Nourishing people, land, and justice through organic agriculture.



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Testimony to House Agriculture, Food Resiliency & Forestry Committee re: H.706

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I'm Maddie Kempner, policy director at the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont. Thank you for inviting me to testify today regarding H.706.

NOFA-VT supports this bill and the phasing out of neonicotinoids for agricultural and other uses in Vermont. NOFA's mission is to promote organic practices to build an economically viable, ecologically sound, and socially just Vermont agricultural system that benefits all living things. The widespread and prophylactic use of neonics goes against that mission, and our values regarding health, respect for farmers, stewardship, and education.

Neonicotinoids harm soil health, birds, pollinators, and by extension, organic farmers.

As you've heard in previous testimony this session, the evidence is clear that neonicotinoids are causing harm to bees, birds, and aquatic life. There are also numerous studies demonstrating neonicotinoids' negative impact on soil organisms. This harm is not only problematic for ecosystem health as a whole, but also directly threatens the health and viability of organic farms in particular.

Organic agriculture functions on the basic principle of working as much as possible with natural systems rather than against them. Organic farmers rely on healthy, living soil and help from beneficial insects and pest predators (such as birds) to grow healthy crops. The organic regulations actually require organic farmers to use practices that maintain or improve the condition of the soil as well as practices that support biodiversity.

What this looks like on the ground, for example, is a farmer planting a hedgerow that can serve as habitat for birds that prey on pest populations, and as forage for bees that pollinate their crops. Below ground, a diversity of soil life forms serves a similar function of keeping pest and disease pressure down, while providing nutrients to crops. This is accomplished using practices like cover cropping, green manures, composting and crop rotations.

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Particularly in a place like Vermont where our land base is small and organic and conventional farms are often side by side, the persistent, negative impact of neonicotinoids on soil life, birds and bees actively works against organic farmers and lots of others who may not be certified organic but who also rely on these species for their own farming systems to succeed.

In conventional systems, practices like cover cropping and crop rotations are thankfully becoming more common as the importance of soil health is better understood. Unfortunately, this growing emphasis on soil health has so far not extended to moving away from the widespread use of harmful inputs like neonics. That may be starting to change, however, as we see neighbors in Canada and New York enact policies to phase them out.

Thanks in part to those policy changes, we know it's possible to farm without the use of neonics even in conventional systems.

UVM Extension and the Vermont Bee Lab [held a webinar held on January 23, 2024](#) where a panel of Quebec farmers shared their experience transitioning away from neonic treated seeds following the ban passed in 2019.

Contrary to the messaging we have heard for years from seed suppliers and others that moving to seed not treated with neonics will lead to decreased yields or worse, crop failure, the Quebec farmers shared that they saw no impact to their yields when they switched to non-neonic treated seed. In fact, many of the farmers we heard from had moved away from insecticide treatments altogether with no negative impact on yield. These outcomes align with EPA's findings as far back as 2014, more recent research from Cornell demonstrating that neonic coatings on corn, soy, and other seed provide little or no economic benefit to farmers, and the initial data from Heather Darby's research here in Vermont.

In the run-up to Quebec's passage of its neonic ban back in 2019, companies went so far as to claim that implementing this policy would lead to the collapse of the grain sector in Quebec. In reality, the impact of the neonic ban on farmers has been so minimal that few if any farmers have even chosen to use the exemption process provided by the law to acquire treated seed.

Another message we hear from industry is that seed companies will be unable or unwilling to provide seed not treated with neonics. One of the farmers participating in the webinar

emphasized that while this message was also pervasive in Quebec leading up to passage of the ban, his experience has been that in fact seed companies do have the ability to turn around and provide untreated seed very quickly, and that messaging around the lack of availability of untreated seed is a simply scare tactic.

Finally, we often hear from seed companies that untreated seed will be more expensive for farmers to buy. In fact, the Quebec farmers participating in the January webinar shared that it often costs between \$10-20 (Canadian) less per bag than treated seed.

The farmers did note that some shifts in practices were needed - crop rotations, for example, have been very important to break pest cycles, as is waiting a little longer than usual to plant in the spring. One farmer specifically mentioned waiting until his organic neighbors were planting as a good indicator of when the timing would be right for him, given that organic farmers need to wait for optimal planting conditions since their seeds aren't treated with fungicide or insecticide.

When Heather Darby testified before your committee last week, she shared a story about attending a meeting where it was announced that neonic treated seed would no longer be optional. It should alarm us that seed companies have taken away farmers' choices in this way, and that these companies have used this lack of farmer choice to grow their profits while we all bear the costs of persistent, systemic pesticides in our environment. We do not have to continue to accept this as the status quo, and we are learning from the experience of our neighbors that it doesn't have to be.

NOFA-VT supports passage of H.706. We thank the committee for taking up this bill and recognizing that we are at a turning point in understanding that our farmers, and Vermont as a whole, can make a different choice.