



4/29/2015

House Committee on Agriculture and Forest Products
Vermont State Legislature
115 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05633-5301

Re: Support for H.236– Act relating to the use of neonicotinoid pesticides

Dear Honorable Members of the House Committee on Agriculture and Forest Products,

Thank you for allowing me the chance to speak to you today. My name is Tiffany Finck-Haynes and I'm the Food Futures Campaigner with Friends of the Earth. With nearly 600,000 members, activists and supporters nationwide Friends of the Earth is a hard-hitting, progressive environmental organization that defends the environment and champions a healthy and just world. We're part of Friends of the Earth International, a federation of groups working in 74 countries on today's most urgent environmental and social issues. Our current campaigns focus on promoting clean energy and solutions to climate change, ensuring the food we eat and products we use are safe for our health and the environment, and protecting marine ecosystems and the people who live and work near them. Our "BeeAction.org" campaign is calling on retailers to stop selling neonicotinoids -- the most widely used class of insecticides in the world - due to a growing body of science indicating that the pesticides are a key factor in recent global bee deaths. Our organization respectfully urges you to support House Bill 236- an Act relating to the use of neonicotinoid pesticides. By banning the use of neonicotinoids we can help to protect bees and other essential pollinators that are vital to the environment and food systems in Vermont.

As a native Vermonter that grew up in Brattleboro, with a family that owns a seven generation maple sugar operation, I believe this piece of legislation is imperative in protecting the bees and other pollinators essential to Vermont's food supply, agricultural economy and environment. Bees are essential to the production of one out of every three bites of food we eat.^{i, ii} Yet evidence is mounting that the health and productivity of these critical pollinators, along with many wild pollinators, is declining rapidly. Over the last eight years beekeepers have lost an average of almost 30 percent of their hives.ⁱⁱⁱ Some beekeepers have lost 100 percent of their operations. This severely jeopardizes the state economy and agricultural system, which Vermont is so well known for.

A growing body of science has implicated a class of systemic insecticides known as neonicotinoids (neonics) — which are used on 140 crops and for cosmetic use in gardens — as a key factor in recent bee die-offs.^{iv} Neonicotinoids can directly kill bees, and sub-lethal exposure increases pollinator vulnerability and decreases natural resilience to external stressors such as pests and pathogens.^{v, vi, vii, viii} Concerns around this class of pesticides have continued to grow, with new studies adding to the body of evidence demonstrating that neonics are not only harming bees, they have also been shown to kill other helpful insects critical to sustainable food production and healthy ecosystems, such as wild bees, bats, butterflies, dragon flies, lacewings, and ladybugs.^{ix, x} Further, this class of pesticides may also be severely impacting bird populations as well as earthworms, mammals, amphibians, and aquatic insects.^{xi, xii, xiii, xiv, xv} Last summer, a global body of twenty-nine independent scientists (the Task Force on Systemic Pesticides) reviewed more than 1,200 peer-reviewed studies published in the last five years, including industry-sponsored studies, and called for immediate regulatory action to restrict neonicotinoids to avoid a "second Silent Spring."^{xvi} This same group of scientists found that neonicotinoids are 5,000-10,000 times more acutely toxic to bees than DDT.

New studies emerge every week pointing to pesticides as a key driver in pollinator and ecosystem declines. Just last week, two new studies released in the journal *Nature* from New Castle University and a set of Swedish researchers

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provided new evidence that neonicotinoid insecticides can have negative impacts on bee health. These studies demonstrate that bees may actually seek out these bee-toxic pesticides that clear science demonstrates can kill bees outright or weaken them and make them more susceptible to other stressors.^{1, 2, 3, 4} The New Castle University study authors concluded that reducing pesticide use “may be the only certain” way to halt bee and pollinator decline.

The widespread agricultural use of neonicotinoids is a common exposure pathway for bees; however, cosmetic use of these pesticides in gardens, lawns, and landscapes may be an important contributing factor in declining bee and wild pollinator health. Many of the “bee-friendly” seedlings and plants sold to unsuspecting consumers in nurseries and garden stores across the U.S. have been pre-treated with neonicotinoids at much higher doses than are used on farms, where levels of neonicotinoid use are already raising concerns among beekeepers and researchers studying the decline of pollinator populations. These nursery plants carry neither a list of pesticides used, nor do they carry a warning that these plants could harm pollinators.

As our study, *Gardeners Beware 2014: Bee-Toxic Pesticides Found in “Bee-Friendly” Plants Sold at Garden Centers across the U.S. and Canada*, shows that 51 percent of “bee-friendly” garden plants purchased at Home Depot, Lowe’s and Walmart in 18 cities across the United States and Canada contain neonicotinoid pesticides at levels that have the potential to harm or even kill bees.

In response to mounting scientific evidence and public concern, many of the UK’s largest home improvement retailers, including Homebase, B&Q and Wickes, made public commitments to no longer sell products containing pesticides linked to declining bee populations in 2013. In the U.S., in the past year, more than twenty nurseries, landscaping companies and retailers have taken steps to eliminate bee-harming pesticides from their stores. BJ’s Wholesale Club, a retailer with more than 200 locations in 15 states, has removed neonicotinoid products from its shelves and is required its suppliers to remove neonicotinoids from plants by the end of 2014 and/or require warning labels for neonicotinoid-treated plants. Home Depot, the world’s largest home improvement retailer is labeling all plants treated with neonicotinoids and working with suppliers to find alternatives. Just this month, Lowe’s the second largest home improvement retailer in the world publicly committed to eliminate neonicotinoid products and plants treated with these insecticides. In October 2014, Whole Foods issued a new product rating system for fruits, vegetables and cut flowers, which identifies pollinator protection as a priority and restricts the use of neonicotinoid pesticides.

Retailers and other businesses are not the only actors recognizing it is imperative to act quickly to protect pollinators. In June 2014, President Obama announced a federal strategy to protect pollinators and called on EPA to assess the effect of pesticides, including neonicotinoids, on bees and other pollinators within 180 days. On April 2, the EPA [announced](#) a moratorium on new or expanded uses of neonicotinoids while it evaluates the risks posed to pollinators. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will phase out use of neonicotinoids on all national wildlife lands by 2016. In the past two years, the European Union as well as the states of Minnesota and Oregon, cities including Spokane, WA, Seattle, WA, Thurston County, WA, Eugene, Portland, OR, Shorewood, St. Louis, Andover and Stillwater, MN and Ontario, Canada and Vermont Law School and Emory University passed measures to address the use of neonicotinoids.

The need for immediate action to be taken on this issue is urgent. If current rates of bee die-offs continue, it’s unlikely that the beekeeping industry will survive this delay, putting Vermont’s economy, agriculture industry and food supply at serious risk.

I have always taken pride in the fact my native state of Vermont is a national leader on many issues, especially environmental and agricultural issues. I hope Vermont will be a national leader on banning this class of insecticides to protect the small, but important creatures upon which so much of our food and plant life depends.

Thank you for your time.



Sincerely,

Tiffany Finck-Haynes
Food futures campaigner
Friends of the Earth-U.S.

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