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OBA Responds to Grain Farmers of Ontario Media Release: “Many Factors Involved In Bee Winterkill Losses”: (July 28, 2014)

Milton, ON: The Ontario Beekeepers’ Association would like to comment on and clarify some of the assertions from the recent press release from the Grain Farmers of Ontario (GFO) related to the recent report on winter losses of bee colonies in Ontario.

From their release:

“As we all recall, Ontario experienced a significantly colder and longer winter in 2014 than normal, as well as heavy ice and snow,” says Henry Van Ankum, Chair of Grain Farmers of Ontario. “It was an unpredictable winter and in talking with beekeepers, some hives exhausted all their nutritional resources before the weather was warm enough to open the hives, resulting in higher ‘winterkill’ numbers.”

The data on excessive overwinter kills for Ontario beekeepers was based on an extensive Canada-wide survey of commercial beekeepers sponsored by the Canadian Association of Professional Apiarists (CAPA). In spite of Mr. Van Ankum’s random discussions with some beekeepers who lost their bees due to lack of stores, a cold winter does not adequately explain the exceedingly high winter loss in Ontario. Quebec beekeepers, for example, who experienced the same if not harsher winter climate suffered less than a third the amount of winter losses as Ontario.

GFO: The report expresses that the Ontario bee population suffered a significant loss over the long, cold winter. The authors of the report propose a link between winterkill and neonicotinoid pesticides. In Ontario, bees face several health risks including varroa mites, disease, lack of nutritional forage, and potential exposure to neonicotinoid pesticides. There has been no scientific link made between any one of these health risks and winterkill.

Mr. Van Ankum’s assertion that there is no science linking bee health risks with winter losses is preposterous. He parrots the same argument used by CropLife to perpetuate the myth that there is insufficient research to support the suspension of neonicotinoids. The sub-lethal impact of neonicotinoids on all aspects of bee health is well documented in the scientific literature. Winter is a stress factor for bees that magnifies any endemic issues present in the hive. A hive that goes into a winter weakened by the effects of neonicotinoid pesticides will severely limit its chances of survival.

Health Canada’s Pest Management Regulatory Agency’s (PMRA) investigation of neonicotinoid associated bee kills in 2012 and 2013 indicated that 90% of the hives had traces of neonicotinoids in the comb and in the pollen entering the hive. The same highly toxic levels of neonics were found in pollen trapped at hives during the Corn Dust Study last year. There is no doubt that bees that come into contact with contaminated pollen and comb during brood rearing in late winter and early spring will likely not survive.

GFO: The report negates to include the reality that overall bee population numbers continue to grow. In Ontario, hive numbers were 75,000 in the fall of 2008 and 100,000 in the fall of 2013.

The number of bee colonies has steadily grown, with an increase of 10,000 hives since 2012 when the concerns of neonicotinoids were raised in Ontario.

Mr. Van Ankum's rationale for his contention that the number of colonies reported in the fall proves that bees are thriving is flawed. How does he reconcile his conclusion with the fact that 58% of Ontario colonies did not survive the winter?

Thoughtful analysis requires understanding the difference between losses and decline. Beekeepers are losing hives to neonicotinoid poisoning but making up hives in the spring by dividing surviving colonies to offset the decline in colony numbers. If bee colony counts were reported in the spring and not fall, the losses would show exactly and logically, 58% fewer colonies than the prior fall.

Honey bee colony numbers can often be managed and losses made up over the season by experienced beekeepers. However, as compared to overwintered colonies, making up for losses means beekeepers suffer the financial burden of labour, new queens, the replacement of contaminated comb and significantly less productive colonies. OBA would also make the point that honey bees are not the only pollinator populations being destroyed by neonicotinoids. Science also expresses concern related to decline of other beneficial insects that are not managed and whose numbers continue to decline.

GFO: "Last winter presented numerous challenges resulting in losses across many agricultural sectors," continues Van Ankum. "Many winter wheat farmers lost acres due to the ice and extreme temperatures, and similarly, we know many beekeepers experienced higher than average losses of bees. This is why, more than ever, it's important that all stakeholders support each other, use the best science and technology available, and work together towards a sustainable solution based on science and facts."

The analogy to winter wheat losses is puzzling. Ontario grows more corn and soy than any other province and the fact that it has lost three times the amount of colonies than the rest of Canada is problematic. Ontario beekeepers' excessive losses cannot be blamed solely on a harsh winter but are likely the cumulative effects of neonicotinoid poisoning which also exacerbate all other bee health issues. The science that shows the negative effects of neonicotinoids on bees and in our environment is overwhelming.

Mr. Van Ankum is correct, however, that farmers and beekeepers need to work together. But first, the GFO needs to stop supporting the AgChem industry at the expense of pollinators responsible for Ontario's fresh fruits and vegetables. According to OMAF crop specialists, the limited benefits of applying neonics to seeds extends to no more than 10% - 30% of acreage: not the nearly 100% of corn seeds that are being treated now. This means that most of the neonic insecticide that is currently being applied to seeds offers no benefit to farmers whatsoever.

The current proposed policy supported by the NFU and the OBA is reasonable. If only those fields that have a proven need for neonic protection are permitted to use it, we can significantly reduce the usage of neonics. By doing so we will offer beekeepers some relief and encourage Integrated Pest Management (IPM) practices while ensuring farmers use insecticides wisely.

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