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Beekeepers Praise Wynne Government for Doing the Right Thing

Milton, ON. The Ontario Beekeepers' Association, representing the interests of Ontario's 3,100 beekeepers has come out in full support of the new regulations announced today. These regulations are intended to protect pollinators by reducing the use of neonicotinoids on Ontario field crops. The OBA was quick to praise the Wynne government for having the courage to act in the face of intensive lobbying and pressure from the AgChem industry seeking to protect their profits.

"Our bees continue to die from the overuse of neonicotinoids," said Tibor Szabo, OBA president, "And while the new regs may not be perfect, in the end, the Ontario government did the right thing."

The Government of Ontario remains committed to reducing acreage using neonicotinoid-treated seeds on corn and soy by 80% by 2017. The new regulations will see sales of treated seeds to farmers limited for the first two years to 50% of their acreage unless they have a permit to buy more. All sales of treated and untreated seeds will be tracked and publicly reported.

"We're farmers, too, and we've always gotten along well with our farm neighbors," added Szabo. "We hope Ontario farmers will now take it on themselves to go beyond 50% reduction and only use neonicotinoids when there's a real need to control pests."

Honey bee losses in Ontario continue to be unsustainable, putting pollinators and the beekeeping industry at risk. Losses were reported at 58% in 2014 and they are estimated to be close to 35% this past winter. Beekeepers consider 15% loss the threshold for a sustainable beekeeping industry. The US recently reported 42% average bee mortality this year with much higher numbers in corn producing states.

"There continues to be overwhelming scientific evidence that neonicotinoids and bee mortality are connected," continued Szabo. "We need to stop the current practice of using it on 99% of corn even when it's not needed."

Since 1881 the Ontario Beekeepers' Association has represented the interests of bees and Ontario's beekeeping industry.

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Backgrounder Q&A

1. *Do the regulations meet all the expectations of Ontario beekeepers?*

Speed is of the essence. Every year of delay means bees are subject to a new planting season and winter where chronic exposure leads to excessive bee mortality. We would, of course, have liked to see these regulations out two years ago when Health Canada announced that current neonicotinoid use in agriculture was unsustainable.

However, the important point today is that the government remains committed to reducing neonicotinoid use on corn and soy seeds by 80% by 2017. With public reporting of seed sales we will for the first time be able to measure and hold the government accountable for achieving their objectives.

2. *What was not included in the regs that beekeepers had asked for?*

We had asked for immediate establishment of no-neonic zones to protect vulnerable queen breeders and staging areas for commercial pollinators. Losing queen stock means the loss of generations of mite and disease resistant DNA. Staging areas are where pollinators gather hundreds of hives for shipment to fruit and vegetable growers.

We are also concerned that sweet corn was exempted. Bees are attracted to sweet corn pollen and therefore subject to direct exposure to neonicotinoid neurotoxins.

3. *The government has also set as a goal 15% overwinter losses by 2020. Is this possible?*

It was not that long ago in the pre-neonicotinoid era that beekeepers were able to overwinter with losses in the 10 – 20% range. The new regs are a big and important step toward this goal but they will not completely eliminate systemic pesticide exposure. The good news is that we are seeing strong rebounds in bee population in Europe where there is a moratorium on the use of neonics on field crops.

4. *What do you say to opponents of the regs who say that the number of colonies in Ontario is greater than ever and so there is no problem in the first place?*

By promoting this myth, pesticide manufacturers had hoped to mislead a public that is smarter than they imagine. Honey bee colony numbers, like all livestock, can be managed, but at a cost to the bees and to beekeepers. When Ontario beekeepers lost 6 out of 10 hives in 2014 we had to make up losses to fulfill the demand for blueberry pollination. Beekeepers split their hives, bought new bees and imported queens to make up for these losses. On top of increasing labor and direct costs to beekeepers, we had to contend with weaker colonies, lower income from pollination services and much less honey production. This notion that there are more bees than ever also completely discounts the dramatic, and in some ways, worse, impact neonicotinoids are having on wild bees and other pollinators.

5. *The opponents to the regs infer Ontario beekeepers are against the use of any pesticide in agriculture. Is this your position?*

The OBA has focused its attention on systemic pesticides that are having a proven effect on honey bees, as well as other insects, water and soil. We are not opposed to all pesticides; in fact, we may use pesticides to control mites and other insect pests in our hives. But we teach beekeepers to do so judiciously and to practice the same IPM philosophy we advocate for farmers.

6. *Do you believe what is happening in Ontario will spread to other provinces or states?*

Despite the opinion of pesticide manufacturers, we hope to see serious reductions or moratoriums of neonicotinoids in all heavy corn and soy growing areas in Canada and the U.S. We know that beekeepers in Quebec have also been affected by neonicotinoid pesticides and are aligned with our call for limitations on their use. We expect that in light of the serious bee mortality numbers exceeding 60% in some US corn growing states we will see some action soon. We hear that Minnesota may be next.

7. *Are you celebrating today?*

This is a good first step. But bee populations continue to decline at an alarming rate. The AgChem lobby is well funded and motivated to protect the sales of the world's best selling pesticide. We expect them to challenge implementation every step of the way. We are committed to work on this issue until bees are safe.