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MEDIA RELEASE: Beekeepers get the facts straight on honey bees

MILTON, ON. A coalition of Ontario Farm organizations, along with pesticide and seed industries, has launched a major advertising campaign touting their concern for honey bees. This expensive campaign is an attempt to defend a highly profitable monopoly that promotes the overuse of the pesticides that are killing Ontario's bees and poisoning our soil and water. The ads purport to "get the facts straight" on honey bees. Unfortunately their presentation of isolated 'facts' are designed to mislead the public into false conclusions about pesticides and honey bee health.

The Ontario Beekeepers' Association has represented the interests of Ontario beekeepers since 1881. No one knows more about honey bees in Ontario than Ontario beekeepers. That's why we need to set the record straight. Let's compare what the ad claims to what beekeepers know to be true:

The ad claims: "Honey bee colonies are up almost 60% since 2003, when the use of neonicotinoid seed treatments were introduced."

Last winter Ontario beekeepers lost 58% of their hives. The number of honey bee colonies (measured in mid summer) does not reflect the large number of colonies lost each winter, nor does it reflect the 30,000 queens or nearly 20,000 bee packages that beekeepers had to purchase to replace the unusually high number of colonies that failed in the winter and spring. We also want to stress that although honey bee colonies can be managed by beekeepers to sustain their numbers, reports indicate serious declines among wild bees and other pollinators.

The ad claims: "Honey production has increased by 29% in the past year and Ontario has a successful honey beekeeping industry which earned \$30 million in 2014."

Fact: Honey production on a per colony basis is actually down by 40% since 2003. We'd also like to point out that 'earnings' are not the same as 'profits'. Every spring Ontario beekeepers work diligently, and at great cost, to recover their winter losses and respond to the high demand for bees for blueberry pollination. Ontario's beekeepers are producing less honey while incurring significant costs to restore their colony numbers. As well, although Canada is a net exporter of honey, Ontario experiences a honey trade deficit of nearly \$15 million due to the lack of safe bee pasture and the inability of pesticide weakened colonies to meet current demand.

Perhaps an even more significant figure is the contribution Ontario's beekeepers make to agriculture which OMAFRA estimates to be \$897 million in Ontario and another \$71 million in eastern Canada.

The ad claims: "Health Canada recently released a report that the number of honey bee incidents reported during planting was down 70 per cent."

Another misleading statement. The Health Canada report cited was an interim report. In fact, Ontario's Ministry of Agriculture, Farming and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) reported (see link to PA report below) that pesticide poisoning incidents were actually higher in 2014 (345) compared to 2013 (320) and 2012 (240). It's also important to note that with 58% of colonies dying over the winter there were fewer colonies exposed to pesticides and, as well, due to the late planting

season, many colonies had already left the province for pollination services when neonic treated corn and soy were being planted.

The ad claims: “Bee experts agree that the top health issues for honey bees are parasites, diseases, inadequate nutrition, adverse weather and hive management practices”.

Another misleading statement. Beekeepers have been able to manage mites, disease and pests for decades. Unfortunately, however, we are unable to avoid pesticide exposure. In Ontario, neonics are used to treat over 5 million acres of soy and corn, when even our own provincial crop specialists say that they are only needed on 10% – 20% of these acres. In addition to killing bees outright, neonicotinoids compromise bees’ immune systems, making them more vulnerable to viruses and making it more difficult to fight off varroa. It reduces their navigation skills, affecting the bees’ capacity to forage and communicate forage opportunities; and it compromise nutrition by reducing the availability of a diversity of uncontaminated plants.

The ad claims: “..real-world level field research consistently demonstrates that response of neonicotinoid seed treatments does not result in honey bee colony health issues.”

In 2013 the E.U. put in place a moratorium on the use of neonicotinoids on field crops based on an extensive review of existing research. More recently additional research has been published that overwhelmingly points to neonicotinoids as the cause of the worldwide decline of bee populations and other organisms. This year after reviewing 600 studies of neonicotinoids in the single, most comprehensive study ever undertaken, scientists concluded:

The body of evidence reviewed in this Worldwide Integrated Assessment indicates that overall, a compelling body of evidence has accumulated that clearly demonstrates that the wide-scale use of these persistent, water-soluble chemicals is having widespread, chronic impacts upon global biodiversity and is likely to be having major negative effects on ecosystem services such as pollination that are vital to food security and sustainable development.

The ad claims: “The fact is these regulations will not benefit honey bees”

We disagree. Ontario has taken a bold step to protect honey bees by setting targets to reduce the use of neonicotinoid pesticides by 80% by 2017. This step, alone, will help honey bees. In the past three years we have seen excessive colony losses and an increase in the number of Ontario beekeepers reporting incidents of pesticide poisoning, leading to Health Canada to conclude in their 2013 report: “the current use of neonicotinoid pesticides on corn and soy is not sustainable”.

Ontario’s policy will disrupt the highly profitable monopoly that the global AgChem industry enjoys by promoting and selling pre-treated seeds as cheap insurance. So it’s no surprise that the industry would spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to deceive the people of Ontario to protect their profits.

As beekeepers, we do not pretend to be crop farming experts. We will not place ads or sponsor websites on crop farming or give advice to growers about how to increase yield. But as farmers, we know about the health of our livestock. We object strongly to any insinuation that current systemic pesticide management practices on Ontario field crops are not killing our bees, ruining our ability to make a living keeping bees and putting vital pollinators and our food security at risk.

One thing we can all agree with, though, “*Bees matter to agriculture. Bees matter to us all.*” ***

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For science and resources on neonicotinoid pesticides: www.ontariobee.com/neonics

For OMAFRA Provincial Apiarist, Paul Kozak's slide presentation to the OBA AGM (source of data above)

<http://www.ontariobee.com/sites/ontariobee.com/files/2014-OBA-AGM-Paul-Kozak-Presentation%20V4%20-%20Nov%2020.pdf>