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Ontario Bee Kills Continue

MILTON, ON. A few good weeks of corn planting weather in May has turned out to be bad news for beekeepers. While Ontario grain farmers have been able to get on the field and get their crops planted, Ontario beekeepers are reporting bee kills and pesticide related problems with colony build-up in corn planting areas.

“We’re definitely hearing about more bee kills this year than in the past two years,” says OBA president Tibor Szabo. “What we are seeing is consistent with pesticide exposure.”

Dan and Betty Walker of Walker’s Honey are producers of queens and nucs in Strathroy. Every day last week, they collected dead and twitching bees from the front of their hives in four separate bee yards. These incidents occurred at the same time that neighbors were planting corn on either side of their bee yard.

Albert Devries of Clovermead Apiaries in Aylmer reports sizeable bee kills and twitching bees in front of more than 300 of his 950 hives, coinciding with recent corn planting in neighboring farms. “This is not new for us. We have experienced bee kills every year for the past 4 or 5 years,” reports Devries. “The only thing working in our favour this year is the cool weather that has limited the flight of bees.”

Tom Congdon is a commercial beekeeper and owner of Sun Parlor Honey, a family-owned and operated business with 1,600 hives located in Essex and Windsor counties. Congdon reports that he is having problems with unusually poor queen fertility during early pollen collection this year. Tests of pollen gathered by his bees from dandelion and flowering trees near cornfields found levels of neonicotinoid pesticides, thiamethoxam and clothianidin, consistent with chronic bee poisoning.

Last year, the Government of Ontario put regulations in place to reduce the overuse of neonicotinoid pesticides used to treat corn and soy. Neonicotinoids are widely used and highly toxic to honey bees. Estimates by crop experts from the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) found that while farmers were applying pesticides to 100% of their corn and 65% of their soy seeds, only 20% of this acreage actually needs pesticide protection.

“What’s happening this year shows pollinators in Ontario are still at risk,” says Szabo. “We can only hope that we will soon see reductions in the use of a class of pesticides that is highly toxic to both honey bees and wild bees as well as other beneficial insects.”

This year Health Canada’s Pest Management Regulatory Agency (PMRA) is documenting but not investigating bee kill incidents or taking bee or pollen samples for analysis. Representatives from both PMRA and OMAFRA have confirmed that despite early days and the unusually cold spring, bee kills this year were equal to, if not greater than, last year.

The OBA has requested PMRA to publicly report the number of incident reports. ***

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