

Let science be our guide

Approximately one third of global food production is dependent on animal pollination, and managed honeybees are the most important pollinators of those crops.

Since 2006, reports of pollinator colony collapse have increased, but no one has identified a sole reason. This is lending itself to an uncertain regulatory atmosphere. For some of the players, the principle of presumed guilt has more appeal than a reasoned, science-based approach. They don't seem to realize that the concerns around pesticide use, and potential effects on bees, are very important to all pesticide users — especially those involved in agriculture.

Oregon farmers depend on bees to pollinate many of their crops, but they also depend on pesticide tools to control destructive pests. Similarly, commercial beekeepers rely on healthy crops to optimize their pollination services. This means that Oregon growers and beekeepers have a lot at stake in this conversation. Each shares a vested interest in ensuring that protecting bee health is not mutually exclusive with the use of pesticides.

Bee health is important to all of us. Nobody wants to see adverse incidents that add to bee population declines. However, it is easy to let emotion, and not logic, drive the conversation around these issues.

While concerns about pesticides and bees have been around for several decades, the high-profile incident in Wilsonville, Oregon, brought heightened attention to the issue. Based on current science, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) continues to allow application of neonicotinoids with appropriate guidelines. These chemistries are among the safest available to combat many pests.

Pollinator health has its day on Capitol Hill

Recently, I had the unique opportunity to testify before the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Horticulture, Research, Biotechnology and Foreign Agriculture on behalf of the nursery and greenhouse industry.

Chairman Rep. Austin Scott (R-Georgia) and ranking member Rep. Kurt Schrader (D-Oregon) asked representatives from the Bayer CropScience North American Bee Care Center, an almond grower from Chico, California, and a leading U.S. Department of Agriculture researcher to join the nursery industry to discuss pollinator health.

My fellow participants before the subcommittee indicated that there is no “smoking gun” on the decline of pollinator health. Nutrition, climate change, parasites and mites, along with pesticides, all contribute.

The most shocking fact that came out of the hearing was the size of the varroa mite, an external parasite that attacks honeybees. It is big — as big on the bee as an orange would be on a human body. Once the mite attaches itself to a bee, the bee goes back to the hive and the mite spreads. It is like

my old dog, Raider, going outside and coming back in and infecting the entire family with heaven knows what. The USDA researcher held up the orange in his hand, and the visual point was made and was remarkable.

The hard part — especially when our emotional reaction is to ban first, solve later — is that it is not any one thing. That is concerning and much harder to deal with. We must be careful not to simply promote science that fits snugly in our personal narrative. There is a plethora of research studies and white papers, many serving the masters who paid for the effort.

Congress should be an aggregator of the information and find the most reasoned path. Until such time, mistakes will be made, bees will be in the news, and states and cities will feel the emotional tug to ban a pesticide.

I urge caution here. The nursery industry has encouraged Congress to direct the research community to pursue its work on this issue without bias. Only then can researchers identify the appropriate steps to alleviate environmental and pest pressures on pollinator health.

A model of collaboration

While the furor over the death of bees received national notoriety, the discussion in Oregon was engaged by beekeepers, environmental groups and farm organizations.

Oregon passed a bill to gather stakeholders and create a Pollinator Health Task Force to make a set of recommendations to the Oregon Legislature. I was appointed to this task force by Gov. John Kitzhaber (D-Oregon).

Over the next two years, stakeholders will roll up their sleeves and work with our land grant university (Oregon State University), legislators and state agencies to determine the most appropriate path forward.

We must acknowledge our stewardship role in using these chemistries. When we use them, we must deploy them as part of a larger management strategy, and always remember to use them only as directed by the EPA-approved label. It is important that consequences and trade-offs be discussed and that a decision on neonicotinoids not lead to economic harm, erosion of pollinator health, or increased human safety concerns during the application of pesticides at the nursery operation.

The public, environmental groups and agriculture have an opportunity to set aside short-term political points and work together on pollinator health. Perhaps by working alongside one another, we can do what is right for pollinator health, environmental stewardship and economic prosperity of our agricultural sector. ©



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A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J Stone'.