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Bee deaths lead to Minnesota insecticide review

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The state will conduct a special review of insecticides tied to the dramatic decline in honeybees across the country, a step that could lead to tighter regulations for one of the most widely used chemicals in agriculture.

It would be the third review of a pesticide by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture in recent years and goes beyond what the state legislature requested last year as part of new laws designed to protect both domestic and wild pollinators. It also coincides with a much more lengthy and extensive review of the same family of pesticides that the Environmental Protection Agency launched last year, which is underway.

Both are in response to the rising fears around the world about the loss of honeybees, which play a vital role in the global food supply, and which have been dying at a rate of 35 percent per year. Many beekeepers and researchers blame a class of insecticides called neonicotinoids, which use nicotine as a toxin, and which are now built into virtually all cultivated plants, from corn to soybeans to potatoes to the garden plants homeowners buy at the nursery. In recent years, a growing body of research around the world shows that while they do not poison bees directly, they can cause neural damage so they can't find their way home again and weaken their immune systems.

"I operate in west central Minnesota, where all I see are corn and soybean fields," said Steve Ellis, a beekeeper from Barrett, who testified Monday at a legislative hearing about the plight of pollinators in Minnesota. He said that the number of hives available to pollinate food crops like almonds, apples and onions is in decline, raising concerns that food production will be affected as well.

"We don't have enough bees to pollinate the one crop," he said, referring to almonds. "That's pathetic." He said he's also spending an extra \$20,000 to \$30,000 per year to keep his bees healthy, and has had to add extra staff to care for his 2,200 hives.

Honeybees do not pollinate corn but are exposed to the toxins when farmers plant seed in the spring. The seeds are coated with pesticide, and the talc used to keep them from sticking blows across the fields and onto dandelions, willows and wildflowers that bees do feed on.

Agriculture Commissioner Dave Frederickson decided to do the new review in part because the agency has already done a similar one on the insecticide that is used against the emerald ash

borer, and which also poses a threat to bees and other pollinators that forage on ash trees in the spring. It found that the labels were often confusing and that product marketing materials were not in compliance with regulations; it recommended monitoring for the toxins in groundwater and streams.

In 2010 it conducted a review of atrazine, a commonly used herbicide for corn, but did not recommend any changes.

The new review will be completed by January, and the agency is expected to hold public hearings. Scientists from the Department of Natural Resources and the Pollution Control Agency will also participate.

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