

The Great Honeybee Conspiracy

EPA Complicit in Colony Collapse Disorder?

By Jimmy Mengel

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The humble honey bee is getting its fair share of buzz this year — which doesn't bode particularly well for the species, or American agriculture as a whole.

The most recent revelations involve leaked government documents, regulatory malfeasance, and scientific censorship. To mix an insect metaphor, it's quite a tangled web...

Since 2006, serious decimation of the North American bee population has taken place. Termed “colony collapse disorder,” millions of worker bees have mysteriously disappeared from their colonies, largely confounding the scientific community.

Blame has volleyed from viruses to fungi to cell phone radiation...

But a suspect has emerged as enemy number one: *Bayer's pesticide clothianidin*.

Clothianidin is widely used on America's corn crops in addition to other ubiquitous crops like canola, soy, and sugar beets.

Leaked EPA documents have detailed the regulatory agency's allowance of clothianidin to maneuver its way through regulatory channels in the face of scientists' warning and flawed studies.

According to these documents provided to beekeeper Tom Theobald, the EPA was aware of the pesticide's dangers way back in 2003; but the EPA granted Bayer a "conditional" approval that allowed them to start using the pesticide.

This conditional approval was contingent on a field study of the pesticide to be carried out in the future. When that study was finally undertaken, many scientists agreed that it was flawed and quite stacked in Bayer's favor.

Here's the EPA's timeline, courtesy of the [Pesticide Action Network North America \(PANNA\)](#).*

*The italicized portions are from the EPA memos:

February 2003: EPA calls for life cycle study prior to registration & for strong labeling language.

Considering the toxicity profile and reported incidents of other neonicotinoids, the proposed seed treatment with clothianidin has the potential for toxic risk to honey bees, as well as other pollinators. As a result of this concern, EFED is asking for additional chronic testing on bee hive activity...

There doesn't seem to be any confusion there; the EPA's scientists had specific toxicity concerns and requested a study to address them.

But just a few months later, they had a change of heart...

April 2003: EPA allows “conditional registration” contingent upon the field study.



Ok, so instead of waiting to see whether the study demonstrated the toxic effects that EPA scientists were worried about, they gave Bayer a *conditional* approval to go ahead and start selling the pesticide to farmers — who were then free to use it despite the safety concerns.

But the agency did suggest Bayer include the following warning label:

This compound is toxic to honey bees. The persistence of residues and the expression of clothianidin in nectar and pollen suggests the possibility of chronic toxic risk to honey bee larvae and the eventual stability of the hive.

A warning label?

Somehow I don't think the bees get a chance to read that label before slurping poisonous nectar from the corn fields...

In any case, the EPA still requests the field study be completed.

March 2004: Bayer gets an extension, EPA agrees to study design changes.

The EPA grants the extension so Bayer can finally conduct the study, though Bayer requests a few key changes:

- The study will be done in Canada, not the United States; and
- The study will focus on canola, not the corn EPA scientists had initially demanded.

These changes are what really damage the study's credibility among critics. Because according to [Grist](#), there are three major issues here:

- Corn produces much more pollen than does canola;
- Its pollen is more attractive to honey bees; and
- Canola is a minor crop in the United States, while corn is the single most widely planted crop.

Add to that the fact that the study's control fields were only 250 meters from the pesticide field — making it likely that bees foraged on both fields, skewing data.

November 2007: EPA finally reviews the field study, finds it “acceptable.”

The EPA had indeed found Bayer's flawed study acceptable and went so far as to call it "scientifically sound"; but oddly enough, the organization did not release the study for public scrutiny...

Only after the [Natural Resources Defense Council](#) filed a Freedom of Information Act request — and eventually sued — was it made publicly available.

Despite the aforementioned problems with the study, the EPA decided to promote clothianidin from conditional to full approval. That distinction prompted Bayer to seek approval for clothianidin's use on both cotton and mustard.

It was during this attempt that EPA's Environmental Fate and Effects Division voiced concerns about the field study in the memo that was made available to beekeeper Theobald. Here's a piece of what they had to say:

Clothianidin's major risk concern is to nontarget insects (that is, honey bees). Acute toxicity studies to honey bees show that clothianidin is highly toxic on both a contact and an oral basis.

Information from standard tests and field studies, as well as incident reports involving other neonicotinoids insecticides suggest the potential for long term toxic risk to honey bees and other beneficial insects.

The memo goes on to cite the problems with the Bayer study, which brings us up to date.

November 2010: EPA downgrades the field study upon which the conditional registration was granted from “acceptable” to “supplemental”; a new study is needed.

So now that the EPA recognizes the need for a new study, they'll be revoking the original approval and stopping clothianidin use, right?

Fat chance. The EPA has said clothianidin will indeed keep its approval rating and continue to blanket corn crops all across the U.S. this spring.

And there's little wonder why. The pesticide is a cash cow.

Bayer raked in over \$250 million from it last year alone. The EPA is helping them maintain that profit margin despite the risks.

Considering bees are absolutely crucial to our agriculture, allowing Bayer to continue selling clothianidin in the face of these warnings is simply irresponsible.

France, Italy and Germany have all banned its use. It's time we do the same.

"This is the critical winter for the beekeeping industry. I don't think we can survive," Theobald said in a recent [interview](#).

He also noted the honey crop this year is the smallest he's ever seen...

"If the beekeeping industry collapses, it jeopardizes a third of American agriculture."

And that would sting more than just the beekeepers.

Be Well,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Jimmy', written in a cursive style.

Jimmy

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Editor's Note: From solar and wind to geothermal and biofuels, *Green Chip* readers want to know which renewable energy resource will take over where fossil fuels leave off. The answer is...all of the above!

There is no one single solution to today's energy crisis. However, the combination of all viable renewable energy resources, coupled with energy efficiency, conservation and smart grid development will not only lead us to energy independence and a cleaner, more sustainable energy infrastructure — but also to what will soon prove to be the greatest investment opportunity of the 21st Century.

More on this topic ([What's this?](#))