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To: Pesticides <Pesticides@maine.gov>
Subject: Fwd: critique of pcb-sponsored pollinator conference in Nov. 2014

protecting pollinators from Bayer and Syngenta

Although MOFGA was listed as a cooperating sponsor of the "pollinator health and safety" conference organized by the Maine pesticide control board and UMaine Cooperative Extension on November 20, regrettably, the speakers' positions were aligned with the agro-chemical establishment rather than with organic advocates. The tone of the event was set by a flyer in the conference folder underwritten by Bayer and Syngenta titled "Pollinators and Pesticide Stewardship. The lead-in: " ... most pesticides are not toxic to pollinators."

In light of pending approval of flupyradifurone, I invited comments from the panel on the wisdom of EPA's habitual granting of "conditional" registrations before safety data is provided. (See NRDC: "Pesticides approved by flawed EPA process.") The response was especially vehement from USDA's David Epstein, staunch defender of government scientists and their industry allies, including AAPCO (pest-control officials), who recommend managed pollinator-protection strategies to USDA and EPA. His account of label changes for neonics and of risk-assessment protocol revisions (from qualitative to quantitative) are not reassuring. And the federal task force plan (including public-private partnerships) he described -- issued in mid-December -- does not inspire confidence.

The Maine state apiarist, after a long recitation of bee declines over three decades (for reasons other than neonics), was worked up enough to inveigh against a November 18 BDN op-ed about Ogunquit's ordinance restricting cosmetic pesticide use on both public and private property -- a thoughtful essay in which Jay Feldman cites passages from Rachel Carson's writings, warning against "turning our waterways into rivers of death."

Like all the panelists, John Skinner (Univ. of Tennessee) deflected attention to other possible causes of declining bee populations and derided "organic" practices. He thinks more study of neonics is in order. (I have to wonder how widely he has read on the subject, since he was unaware that it is possible to buy corn seed NOT treated with neonics.)

Although hundreds of reputable studies have been done linking neonics to bee infirmity and deaths -- see the July 2014 Worldwide Integrated Assessment of ... Systemic Pesticides on Biodiversity and Ecosystems, a review of 800 peer-reviewed reports, concluding that neonicotinoids pose a threat to global biodiversity -- conference planners did not invite anyone who diverged from the party line: neonics are necessary and must remain in use while researchers continue to study them. When one attendee reminded the panel of neonics' persistence in ecosystems, with long-term systemic damage to soil and water as well as to wildlife, he was brushed off.

Precautionary-principled researchers recognize fully the problematic role of neonicotinoid interactions with other insecticides and fungicides, as well as with parasites and viruses, in diminishing immune defenses. None would suggest that neonics are the sole cause of mass bee die-offs, yet the panelists at the Portland event, in making their case for retaining neonics, regularly put up that straw-man argument. They also tried to blame ignorant beekeepers and homeowners for misuse of pesticides, as though that were the main problem to be addressed.

It was all pretty shameful. In my humble opinion, practices recommended by Bayer and Syngenta -- like mowing plants in bloom before spraying, along with putting flowering margins around sprayed fields to provide pesticide-free bee habitats -- cannot mitigate for the crisis being caused by chemical agents. Targeting of neonics is warranted because scientific data is strong enough to outweigh industry-funded studies. And because the stakes are so high for ecosystems and for food production. The campaign creates a platform for educating consumers, farmers, and other interested parties about the terrible tradeoffs that come with use of systemic pesticides and with various other types: organophosphates, carbamates, pyrethroids, etc. Regrettably, that was not provided by the agro-industrial establishment to the audience on Thursday, many of whom were there for academic credits.

We can only hope that MOFGA will hold a followup seminar and will lend aggressive support to the bill banning neonics (submitted by Rep. Brian Jones and withdrawn at the bidding of potato growers last year), which is being reintroduced in the current legislative session.

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