

# Maine bill would limit use of pesticides linked to bee deaths

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Pollen may be a bee's best friend when it comes to producing nectar and honey, but for anyone dealing with seasonal allergies pollen is a sneezy, eye-watering part of spring and summer in Maine.

A bill making its way through the Maine Legislature seeks to restrict — or limit — the use of four specific pesticides, all belonging to a class known as neonicotinoids, which are considered threats to honey bees and other pollinators.

“Clothianidin, dinotefuran, imidacloprid or thiamethoxam are highly toxic to honey bees and bumblebees,” Rep. Nicole Grohoski, a Democrat from

Ellsworth, told members of the Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry committee Thursday.

Grohosk said research suggests that pollinator declines are caused by a number of stressors, but that the widely-available chemicals named in the bill are also a factor.

And, she said, homeowners don't always understand the risks. "These people don't have endless free time to research which chemicals are more or less toxic, nor are they likely to read the very fine print on the back of the bottle."

Under the bill, the named pesticides would no longer be available for home and landscape use, and would require certification for use.

A number of conservation organizations testified in favor of the bill. They say given the importance of pollination in the world food supply, it is reasonable to reduce the use of these toxins.

But critics say language in the bill as written is not clear, fails to define what "landscaping" really is, and could have unintended consequences for agriculture.

"This bill is what we call a slippery slope towards affecting us farmers and some of the better chemicals that we can use to help protect our produce – apples in our case," said Harry Ricker, an apple grower in Turner.

Ricker said even though the bill is aimed at home owners, not farmers, it could lead to unintended consequences and public misunderstanding about the compounds in question. "These chemicals are selective. They're pretty good at killing most of the bad bugs, and they're easy on the good bugs," he said.

Ricker said the chemicals are safe and effective when used as directed. But Beth Ahern, with Maine Conservation Voters, said consumers don't always do

that.

Ahern read a letter from an Ellsworth resident who said a friend of hers had started treating her tomatoes with these chemicals, thinking an insect was to blame.

“First, I pointed out that her problem wasn’t an insect; it was actually a woodchuck – a little different – whose tracks were found throughout the garden,” Ahern read. “Second, I picked up a handful of dead mason bees that were all over the ground around her plants – the very kind of good insect she needed to pollinate those tomatoes.”

Both critics and supporters of the bill say changes to language and clarifications will need to be worked out.

A similar effort to crack down on neonicotinoid pesticides failed in 2017.

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