



# A BEE Protective Update

**Large and small, communities and organizations throughout the country take action to protect pollinators**

*Brittany Phillips, Dunbarton NH, "Skies are clear, enjoy your flight!"*

**by Drew Toher**

The continuing pollinator crisis has galvanized governments, universities, and concerned residents across the U.S. to take action in an attempt to stem the decline of honey bees and wild pollinators. As the science continues to confirm the role that neonicotinoids (neonics), a class of highly toxic, persistent and systemic insecticides, play in pollinator declines, organizations of all sizes are taking bee-friendly action by restricting the use of these unnecessary pesticides. Beyond the role these chemicals play in pollinator decline is a growing recognition of the toxicity of pesticides in general, and an understanding that they are not required for the maintenance of quality landscapes. The policies enacted below acknowledge this point, revealing steps that should be taken to reduce the overall chemical burden in managed landscapes across the country. These efforts support a Memorandum issued by President Obama on June 20, calling on federal agencies to, "promote the health of honey bees and other wild pollinators." However, overarching action must still be taken by Congress or the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

## **Federal Level**

***Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), Pacific Region National Wildlife Refuges:*** In mid-July of 2014, the Pacific Region (Region 1) National Wildlife Refuge announced in an internal memorandum that it intended to phase out the use of bee-toxic neonics. "The Pacific Region will begin a phased approach to eliminate the use of neonicotinoid insecticides (by any method) to grow

agricultural crops for wildlife on National Wildlife Refuge System lands, effective immediately," the memo states. "By January 2016, Region 1 will no longer use neonicotinoid pesticides in any agricultural activity." The new guidelines go on to explain that the change in policy will also affect the transition period through 2016. During that time, refuge managers must exhaust all remedies before an application or use of

neonics, including the use of neonic-treated seeds. Additionally, starting in 2015, all refuge managers must prepare and submit a Pesticide Use Proposal (PUP) in order to apply any neonics during the transition to the ban. Beyond Pesticides hopes that these requirements assist land managers in developing a strategy to manage pests without the use of any toxic pesticides, particularly neonicotinoids.

**Fish and Wildlife Service, All National Wildlife Refuges:** Shortly after the decision in the Pacific Region, FWS announced that all National Wildlife Refuges would join in the phase-out of neonics (while also phasing out genetically engineered crops) by January 2016. “We have determined that prophylactic use, such as a seed treatment, of the neonicotinoid pesticides that can distribute systemically in a plant and can potentially affect a broad spectrum of non-target species is not consistent with Service policy. We make this decision based on a precautionary approach to our wildlife management practices and not on agricultural practices.” Given the widespread use of risk-benefit analyses from other government agencies, FWS’ appeal to a precautionary approach sets a positive, refreshing tone for U.S. federal agencies. The news from FWS comes partially in response to the President’s Memorandum, and after Beyond Pesticides, along with Center for Food Safety and Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, conducted a nearly decade-long legal campaign urging FWS to prohibit genetically engineered crops, and, more recently, neonics in National Wildlife Refuges. This move will not only protect honey bees that have suffered average losses above 30% since 2006, but also the federally threatened and endangered pollinators that live in our National Wildlife Refuges.

### State Level

**Minnesota:** Under HF2798, signed into law by Minnesota Governor Mark Dayton, plants may not be labeled as beneficial to pollinators if they have been treated with and have detectable levels of systemic insecticides. The law specifically states, “A person may not label or advertise an annual plant, bedding plant, or other plant, plant material, or nursery stock as beneficial to pollinators if the annual plant, bedding plant, plant material, or nursery stock has been treated with and has a detectable level of systemic insecticide that: (1) has a pollinator protection box on the label; or (2) has a pollinator, bee, or honey bee precautionary statement in the environmental hazards section of the insecticide product label.” Concurrently,

as part of an omnibus spending bill, Minnesota legislators also created an emergency response team to react to honey bee losses that are suspected to be related to pesticides, and the requirement that beekeepers be compensated as a result of pesticide poisoning.

### Cities, Towns

**Shorewood, Minnesota:** In addition to restricting the use of bee-killing pesticides, the self-described “bee-safe” resolution passed by the City of Shorewood in August 2014 encourages the planting of bee-friendly habitat. This action will help strengthen local pollinator populations and create natural resilience to pest pressures. Earlier in the year, Shorewood city leaders had sent a letter to the state legislature in support of HF2798, described previously.

**Eugene, Oregon:** In March 2014, Eugene, Oregon became the first community in the nation to specifically prohibit the use of neonicotinoid pesticides on city property. Showing the power of the pollinator crisis to spur the need for a systems approach to pest management, legislation was added to a revision of the city’s pesticide-free parks program, which now requires all departments to adopt integrated pest management standards, and halt the use of bee-toxic pesticides in all city land management. Action by Eugene’s City Council can be traced in part to a massive bee kill that occurred in Oregon in 2013, where 50,000 bumblebees died after being sprayed in a Target parking lot. The incident only resulted in a small fine of under \$3,000, just six cents per bee, infuriating beekeepers, environmentalists, and advocates.

**Spokane, Washington:** The City of Spokane, Washington in June became the second in the nation to move towards alternatives to the use of bee-toxic pesticides. Spokane City Council President Ben Stuckart noted to *The Seattle Times*, “Bees are so important we should be leading the way to protect them.” The ordinance stops the use of neonics on 32% of land in the city. Council President Stuckart is hopeful that the parks department,

which controls another 18% of land under separate governance, will follow the city’s lead in prohibiting use of the products.

**Skagway, Alaska:** Signed in mid-September, Skagway, known as the “Garden City of Alaska,” banned both the public and private sale and use of neonics. Pollinator concerns were part of a comprehensive pesticide ordinance crafted by city leaders that also restricts the use of pesticides on lawns and near waterways, again showing the need for a change in approach to all pesticide use in order to protect human health and the environment. Because Alaska municipalities are not subject to regressive preemption laws that prevent local governments from enacting pesticide restrictions that are more stringent than the state’s, Skagway was able to ban the private sale and use of neonics, making it the strongest bee protections in the country.

**Seattle, Washington:** In late September, Seattle, Washington became the largest U.S. city to protect bees and other pollinators. The resolution, signed by Seattle Mayor Ed Murray, discontinues the purchase and use of neonics on city-owned property and calls for a national moratorium on the use of the toxic pesticides, urging the White House Pollinator Health Task Force, EPA, and Congress to suspend the registration of neonics. Along with encouraging federal action, the resolution asks retailers within the city to stop selling plants, seeds, or any other products that contain neonics. As City Councilmember Mike O’Brien notes, this action is a “modest step,” and further movement toward alternative pest management should be considered in order to promote long-term pollinator health.



## Universities

### **University of Vermont Law School (VLS):**

The first BEE Protective campus was officially recognized in August, as Vermont Law School took action to halt the purchase and use of neonics on its campus. “Honey bees and other pollinators play a critical role in agricultural systems,” said Laurie Ristino, director of the Center for Agriculture and Food Systems (CAFS) and VLS associate professor of law. “Protecting their health and safety is a reflection of Vermont Law School’s commitment to the environment and CAFS’ mission to support sustainable food and agricultural systems. We hope more will follow our lead.”

**Emory University:** In September, Emory University’s Office of Sustainability Initiatives released a campus pollinator protection commitment based on the philosophy that “protecting pollinators will further Emory’s sustainability vision to help restore the global ecosystem, foster healthy living, and reduce the university’s impact on the local environment,” said Ciannat Howett, the school’s sustainability director. In addition to banning the use of neonics on campus, Emory also plans to make sure that replacement products for neonics also do not harm bees. The university will only purchase plants that are not pre-treated with neonics, increase pollinator friendly plantings, and conduct campus outreach and education on the importance of pollinators.

## Voluntary Initiatives

**Bee Safe Boulder:** News of “Bee Safe” communities made national headlines as a group of concerned residents mobilized their neighborhood into caring for the pollinators that dot their yards and landscapes. Bee Safe Boulder, led by Anne Bliss, Molly Greacen, and David Wheeler, now has over 200 contiguous neighbors in the Melody-Catalpa neighborhood that have pledged to not use neonics and plant bee-friendly spaces. And the group puts a premium on homeowners completely eliminating chemical pesticides in order to truly protect pollinators. As the Bee Safe website notes, “We will also encourage people to stop using all poisons so a healthy ecosystem can develop wherein

all pests become food for their predators.” Numerous other communities across the country, from Virginia to the San Juan Islands are hitting the pavement and knocking on doors to protect their backyard pollinators. Beyond Pesticides has provided a \$5,000 grant to Bee Safe Boulder to forward their efforts to educate and enact pollinator protective policy.

## Need for Overarching Action

The actions described above are critical for pollinators on a local or regional level, and help contribute to the public and political pressure required to save our bees. However, the pollinator crisis is global, and comprehensive changes must be taken at the federal level in order to have the broad impacts that are urgently needed to safeguard the food diversity and agriculture productivity that pollinators provide for society. One in three bites of food depends on pollinators, including nutrient dense crops such as apples, cranberries, almonds, and blueberries, and pollination services contribute \$20-30 billion to the U.S. agricultural economy. A world without bees would mean a bland unwholesome diet, and certainly higher food prices.

Overarching action must come from Congress or federal agencies. Either EPA needs

to suspend the use of neonic pesticides, or Congress must pass the *Saving America’s Pollinators Act*, introduced by U.S. Representatives John Conyers (D-MI) and Earl Blumenhauer (D-OR). EPA has indicated that it does not plan to conduct a review of neonic pesticides until 2018 –far too long to wait. The *Saving America’s Pollinator Act*, which would suspend the registration of neonics until a scientific review establishes that they are safe for pollinators, is supported by over 70 cosponsors. Federal legislators and regulators should follow the lead set by the European Union and now the Interior Department’s Fish and Wildlife Service. Given evidence showing little improvement in yield and pest control from use of these chemicals, and widespread availability of alternative products and practices through organic methods, these chemicals should have no place in our environment.

The silver lining in this crisis is that neonics have alerted communities to the broad impacts of pesticide use in general, and, in restricting their use, are now looking at alternative methods to manage pest problems. Whether through the creation of resilient habitat, or employing least-toxic and organic alternatives, there is a growing recognition that simply moving to another toxic chemical is not the solution.

## Organize in Your Community

While we encourage our members and supporters to continue to submit comments to EPA and write letters to Congress, with more communities enacting bee-friendly policies our collective voice will be stronger. Encourage your own community or campus to be pollinator-friendly and make changes that will protect your local pollinator population. Get the Model Community Pollinator Resolution (<http://bit.ly/modelBEEpolicy>) in the hands of local elected officials or school administrators. For help with your campaign, visit the BEE Protective webpage ([www.beeprotective.org](http://www.beeprotective.org)), and contact Beyond Pesticides at 202-543-5450, or by email at [info@beyondpesticides.org](mailto:info@beyondpesticides.org).

