Chemical Sensitivity Demands Accommodation for Bees and Humans

If anyone needs evidence of the extremely urgent need to stop hazardous pesticide use, just have them read about the disappearance of the bees. This issue of Pesticides and You is a good start. Yes, this crisis is a complex issue, but a little digging on the issue brings us directly to the fact that our pesticide policies do not adequately protect sensitive species, with bees at the top of the list.

Colony Collapse Disorder

We devote much of this issue of PAY to the crisis of colony collapse disorder (CCD) in the honeybee population. CCD is an increasingly widespread phenomenon of bees disappearing or abandoning their hives. There are, of course, numerous theories that involve pesticides, viruses, and pathogens. Bayer CropScience, the manufacturer of one of the implicated pesticides, imidacloprid, dismisses the pesticide connection. But countries, including France, Germany and Italy, have taken steps to limit its use, along with other pesticides like fipronil. The National Union of French Beekeepers brought the problem to national attention and forced their government to restrict these pesticides. The U.S. lags behind, outside the glare of public outrage and protests that have been seen in Europe.

The pesticide link to bee poisonings is not new. And, the lack of an adequate regulatory response is as old as our 1972 federal pesticide law and all its revisions. What we are seeing today is an escalation of a problem that has been building for decades. Bees support our environment, pollinating half the flowering plant ecosystem and one-third of agricultural plants.

Problems Escalate Under Risk Assessment Standards

The disappearance of the bees alerts us to a fundamental and systemic flaw in our approach to the use of toxic chemicals –and highlights the question as to whether our risk assessment approach to regulation will slowly but surely cause our demise without a meaningful change of course. Michael Schacker, the author of *A Spring Without Bees: How Colony Collapse Disorder Has Endangered Our Food Supply*, reviewed in this issue of PAY, identifies humans' anthropocentric worldview as justifying our manipulation of nature to the brink of destruction. The bees should serve as a warning because our very existence depends on theirs.

The bee problem, which is not new just more frightening than it has ever been, should be a wake-up call. It should force a rethinking of how we approach policies that allow the management of "pests" with a war-like mentality and the continued use of chemicals for which there are safe alternatives. While admittedly uncertain and filled with deficiencies, risk assessments establish unsupported thresholds of acceptable chemical contamination of the ecosystem, despite the availability of non-toxic alternative practices and products. In fact, the only acceptable policies in this crisis are those that eliminate toxic pesticide use. The only acceptable legislative reform proposals are those that eliminate unnecessary toxic chemical use. For example, why do we allow chemical-intensive practices in agriculture when organic practices that eliminate the vast majority of hazardous substances are commercially viable? Risk assessments, supported by environmental and public health statutes, in effect prop-up unnecessary poisoning.

The Human Connection

An unhealthy ecosystem adversely affects the health of all those living in it. So, it comes as no surprise that people, along with other species, suffer environmental illness.

It is not a far stretch, then, to focus on environmental illness in humans. The same neurotoxic impacts on bees are being diagnosed in humans. So, as we write about in this issue of PAY, it is time for the Justice Department in implementing the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) to recognize chemical sensitivity (CS) or environmental illness as a disability that requires accommodation at work, school, in housing, and recreation areas --all public areas to which access is denied because of toxic pesticide use. Beyond Pesticides, with groups across the country, submitted comments this summer, published in this issue, urging the department to recognize that chemical exposure "substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of such [chemically sensitive] individuals," qualifying those adversely affected for protection under the law. In light of the availability of alternative approaches to pest management that do not rely on toxic chemicals, we believe it is reasonable to expect such protection. The time for this is long overdue.

If bees could speak to us, they would probably say what Linda Baker, a former teacher and coach from Kansas, wrote in our ADA comments about those with CS. "[L]ack of accommodation caused their illness to progress to the point where they could no longer work." She continues, "CS takes a huge toll on individual lives and results in unnecessary loss of productivity." Author Michael Schacker asks whether we are really facing "Civilization Collapse Disorder."

Solutions Are Within Our Reach

Solutions to the loss of bees and human productivity are clearly within our reach if we engage our communities and governmental bodies. A little outrage will help. We know how to live in harmony with the ecosystem through the adoption of sustainable practices that simply do not allow toxic pesticide use. Whether we are talking about managing buildings or landscapes, it can be done. It must be done. Our survival depends on it.

- Jay Feldman is executive director of Beyond Pesticides.