



Activists would like the U.S. government to ban a class of insecticides called neonics that they blame for wiping out the bees that pollinate a majority of our food crops. (Photo by Cory Barnes, FlickrCC)

# EARTH TALK

Questions & Answers About Our Environment

**Dear EarthTalk:** Did anyone ever figure out what has been killing all the bees, and is there anything we can do about it?  
 - Gerry Sanders, Wichita, KS

By now, we've all heard about bees dying across the U.S. and around the world.

This isn't just bad news for beekeepers: these amazing insects pollinate upwards of two-thirds of our food crops—all at no cost to farmers or consumers.

All we need do is keep them around, which is proving to be more and more difficult.

A third of all beehives in the U.S. have disappeared in the last decade alone, a situation that has been

dubbed Colony Collapse Disorder. Experts say several factors are at play.

First, global warming has changed weather patterns so profoundly that bees have been unable to adapt fast enough. Flowers now bloom so early or late that they don't coincide with the active season of pollinators, so when bees emerge from hibernation the flowers they need for food have already bloomed.

Another threat is habitat loss: development, urbanization and monoculture farming are decimating natural areas bees need to thrive. And a new generation of parasites is infiltrating hives and impeding chemical communication between bees.

But perhaps the biggest threats to bees are some of the pesticides routinely used in agriculture, particularly neonicotinoids.

Commonly referred to as neonics, this increasingly popular class of insecticides is meant to eliminate pests, but has been proven to have an equally devastating impact on bees.

Today, seeds are engineered with neonics from the start, so this harmful chemical is present in the plant, pollen and nectar. This chemical,

approximately 6,000 times more toxic to bees than DDT, devastates bee central nervous systems and makes it impossible for them to relocate their hives.

Those bees that survive a first encounter aren't off the hook. They remain dazed and inefficient. Neonics have an addictive quality similar to that of nicotine for humans, so surviving bees inevitably return to treated flowers until their death.

Policy changes must address this issue by rewarding farmers for

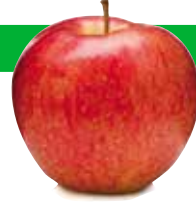
sustainable practices and banning neonicotinoids for use as pesticides.

Unfortunately, big agri-chemical companies like Dow Chemical and Syngenta make huge profits selling neonics and as such are reluctant to withdraw them.

The European Union took steps to ban the use of neonics in member countries in 2013, although that ruling is currently under review.

Meanwhile, in the U.S., a few cities and states have taken at least  
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