

Op-Ed

Ontario Loves Bees!

By Gideon Forman and Beatrice Olivastri

Back in November, the Ontario government signaled its intention to reduce the use of “neonic” pesticides on corn and soy seed by 80% by 2017. A prime motivator for the proposal was a new analysis from the Task Force on Systemic Pesticides—a group of 29 independent scientists from around the world—who examined 800 scientific papers and concluded neonics “pose a serious risk of harm to honeybees and other pollinators such as butterflies...” A second motivator was a survey from the Canadian Association of Professional Apiculturists showing nearly 6 out of 10 Ontario honeybee colonies did not survive the winter of 2013/2014.

The issue may seem obscure—“apiculture” is not always discussed at cocktail parties—but the extraordinary thing is just how many Ontarians care about pollinators and want government to take action to protect them.

Research done by Oraclepoll Research Limited in December 2014, following the release of the government’s proposals, shows a remarkable consensus emerging: irrespective of whether they’re male or female, urbanites or rural folks, social democrats or conservatives, the vast majority of residents feel Ontario is “on the right track” with its plan to limit neonic use.

For example, Oraclepoll found the proposed neonic cuts are supported by 81% of those living in Toronto. Given the city’s reputation for environmental concern that comes as no surprise, but support is at 77% in conservative eastern Ontario and at 85% in the mostly rural southwest. Overall, support among city and country people is virtually identical at 78.7% and 78.4%, respectively.

As might be expected, the proposed policy is backed by young people, with 78% of those aged 18 to 34 endorsing it. But almost exactly the same number in the 35 to 54 cohort support it. And even among Ontarians 55 and older, who might be more resistant to change, support for neonic cuts is at 76%.

One-hundred percent of those planning to vote Green endorse the pesticide restrictions—no news there—but so do 85% of Liberals, 81% of Progressive Conservatives and 80% of New Democrats.

Seldom does one find a policy that enjoys such extensive public support. What explains this?

Ontarians know bees are vital to a healthy environment. But they also know their loss threatens human nutrition. These insects pollinate about a third of our food. Dr. Jean-Marc Bonmatin, a lead author of the Task Force report mentioned above, has written: “Far from protecting food production the use of neonics is threatening the very infrastructure which enables it, imperiling the pollinators, habitat engineers and natural pest controllers at the heart of a functioning ecosystem.”

The necessity of safeguarding our food supply—by phasing out bee-killing chemicals—is something we can all agree on.

Perhaps, as well, we now view bees as an iconic species—as important and vulnerable in southern Canada as the Polar Bear is in the north. If these creatures are in jeopardy, so too is a part of our identity. That’s enough to unite folks right across the province, irrespective of their political persuasion, age, or place of residence. People know that if we lose our bees, we lose a part of ourselves as Canadians.

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The polling was performed by Oraclepoll Research Limited. A total of 1,000 Ontarians, 18 years and older, were interviewed between December 5th and 9th, 2014. The margin of error is $\pm 3.1\%$, 19/20 times.