

Is This the Most Bee-Friendly City in America?

A pesticide ban in Eugene, Ore., puts it at the forefront of protecting pollinators.

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(Photo: Petko Danov/Getty Images)

March 18, 2014 | *By Clare Leschin-Hoar*



Clare Leschin-Hoar's stories on seafood and food politics have appeared in *Scientific American*, *Eating Well* and elsewhere.

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With the passage of a [new resolution](#) banning products that contain neonicotinoids on any city property, Eugene, Ore., may very well be the most bee-friendly city in America.

The ban, which applies to parks and school grounds, may be more symbolic than effective, but local urban beekeepers like Blessed Bee's Philip Smith say it's a notable shift, one he hopes home owners will emulate.

"Cities used to be the safe zone for bees," says Smith. "But pretty much all the beekeepers I know in town have lost bees the last couple of years."

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Scientists are still working out the exact cause of [colony collapse disorder](#), and the roles mites, diseases, or pesticides may play in the worrisome disappearance of bees. But Smith, who lost half of his hives over the last year, says he believes the smoking gun is the increased use of a class of pesticides known as neonicotinoids.

Typically used as seed treatments on genetically engineered corn and soybean crops, today neonicotinoids are [increasingly being used](#) on landscaping and garden plants in cities where urban bees forage for pollen.

A massive bee die-off in Wilsonville, Ore., [grabbed headlines](#) last year when more than 25,000 bees were killed after blooming linden trees near a Target parking lot were sprayed with the neonicotinoid dinotefuran. While that was a dramatic example of an urban die-off, it's the everyday garden use of this class of pesticide that has scientists worried.

[Vera Krischik](#), an entomologist at the University of Minnesota, says notable levels of neonicotinoid residue have been found in the pollen and nectar of typical urban garden plants, ranging from pumpkins to flowering plants to citrus, maple, and chestnut trees. Although it takes 192 parts per billion to kill a bee, levels above 10 ppb are enough to impact their behavior.

"If it's above 10 ppb, they can't remember how to get back to the hive," says Krischik, who published a study today in [PLOS One](#) examining bees and neonicotinoids. "All the urban uses are way higher than 10 ppb and are killing everything that feeds on pollen and nectar, including ladybird beetles, green lacewings, and parasitic wasps."

Worries go beyond just insects. There are serious [concerns over birds and aquatic life](#) as well.

Krischik says the problem is that neonicotinoids are systemic—meaning they are applied to the soil or seed and are taken up throughout the plant. "You apply it once, and it shows up in the pollen and nectar for a year. They go through the plant and are there for a long time," she says.

Eugene may have been the first community to specifically ban neonicotinoid use on city property, but Paul Towers, spokesperson for Pesticide Action Network, says he expects other cities to follow, including Minneapolis, and in California, Berkeley, El Cerrito, and Santa Barbara.

There's plenty of activity at the state level as well.

Minnesota is considering several bills, [including one](#) that would prevent plants treated with neonicotinoids from being labeled "beneficial to pollinators" that's scheduled for a hearing tomorrow.

[A bill in California](#) would push the state's Department of Pesticide Regulation to make a decision on its reevaluation of neonicotinoids by July. [Maine](#), [New Jersey](#), and [Vermont](#) are also considering bans on the use of neonicotinoids.

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But unlike the European Union, which began a two-year ban on neonicotinoids in December, the U.S. has no such regulation in place, and H.R. 2692, known as [the Saving America's Pollinator Act](#), has languished since it was introduced last year.

The USDA is expected to release its report on overwinter losses next month. In the meantime, the agency announced it would spend [\\$3 million on a program](#) to pay Midwestern farmers to plant fields with bee-friendly crops. Whether or not that will be effective is unclear.

"It's much harder to produce healthy food for bees on a multimillion-acre scale," says Towers. "The easiest place to start is controlling pesticides."

A year ago, Towers' group slapped the Environmental Protection Agency [with a lawsuit](#) for failing to protect bees. On Thursday, he says Pesticide Action Network will deliver a million signatures to the EPA, again calling on the agency to take action.

While public policy has been slow to change, Krischik says home owners have choices when it comes to neonicotinoids.

"You don't have to use them. A contact insecticide [for example, spot spraying for aphids] works just as well. If you have a problem, that's what you should use," she says.