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Growing concern over the health of Oregon's bee population

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By Simon Gutierrez [CONNECT](#)

PORTLAND, OR (KPTV) - Around the country, bees have been disappearing in alarming numbers, and there is a growing concern about the health of pollinators, and the same concerns are present in Oregon.

A series of high-profile bee die-offs in 2013 were linked to pesticides improperly applied to shade trees in Wilsonville and Hillsboro, and brought the health of local pollinators into the forefront.

"We've got this really amazing endowment of bees in the state. How do we keep it at the level that it currently is," said Andony Melathopoulos, an entomologist with Oregon State University's Extension Service.

Melathopoulos works closely with bees, and develops materials for the agriculture community about responsible pesticide use.

"The issue, I think, is really doing sound education on trying to only use pesticides when they're absolutely needed," said Melathopoulos.

The Oregon Department of Agriculture doesn't directly track bee deaths, but does track complaints about pesticide use.

In the last three years, there have been 769 such complaints, which prompted ODA investigations.

Sixty-three of those cases involved dead bees, but only three cases resulted in a notice of violation.

"A lot of times what we're finding out is that it's not pesticide related," said Rose Kachadorian, a pesticide regulatory leader with the ODA.

Pesticides are often suspected, though. In 2015 and 2016, Cameron Winery lost hundreds of bees to sudden die-offs.

The winery's owner, John Paul, suspected neonicotinoids, a form of pesticides that were linked to the bee deaths in Wilsonville.

Testing of the bees done by OSU were inconclusive, Paul said.

This year, the state legislature considered a bill that would have put more restrictions on neonicotinoid use, but the bill died before making it to the Senate floor.

"The fact that it died unceremoniously was a shock, because there was ample support in this building," said Lisa Arkin, whose organization, Beyond Toxics, lobbied for the bill.

This summer, a large-scale field study in Europe and the United Kingdom found that even properly applied neonicotinoid pesticides can be harmful to pollinators.

Melathopoulos said the importance of pesticides to agriculture means there will always be potential for pollinators and toxics to interact, but said limiting pesticide use outside of agriculture is a viable option that could reduce the risk.

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