

Let's Talk about Pesticides

Neonicotinoid insecticides ("neonics") were introduced in the 1990's and are now the most widely used insecticides in North America. Although these insecticides are banned in many parts of Europe, it is difficult to find any crop plants in the US that do not contain neonics, as these are used to coat seeds prior to planting. In a 2013 report, which announced the astounding loss of 3 billion birds in North America since 1970, the American Bird Conservancy found many neonicotinoid insecticides, notably the most widely used Imidacloprid and acetamiprid, to be potentially lethal to birds. Neonics were also predicted to impact aquatic systems upon which birds depend for food. Observed contamination levels in surface and groundwater in the US and around the world were strikingly high, and well beyond the threshold found to kill aquatic invertebrates. However, the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), using scientifically unsound and outdated methodology, greatly underrated these risks. Given these findings, the recommendations from The American Bird Conservancy and its partners in the National Pesticide Reform Coalition (NPRC) urged the EPA to:

- *"Suspend all applications of neonicotinoids pending independent review of these products' effects on birds, terrestrial and aquatic invertebrates, and other wildlife.*
- *Expand its re-registration review of neonicotinoids beyond bees to include birds, aquatic invertebrates, and other wildlife.*
- *Ban the use of neonicotinoids as seed treatments.*
- *Require that registrants of acutely toxic pesticides develop the tools necessary to diagnose poisoned birds and other wildlife."*

This was in 2013. Now, after a decade of inaction, neonicotinoids are still widely used on crops in North America, although they have been banned in Europe. In Palm Beach, imidacloprid is the most commonly used pesticide by homeowners whose landscapers tell them this is essential to save their ficus hedges from white fly inundation. In reality, most white fly populations have built up resistance to this chemical so it is no longer efficient.

New toxicity studies carried out over the last decade reinforce the high danger of imidacloprid and acetamiprid to birds, bees, and pollinators. The report published in 2023, "Neonicotinoid insecticides: Failing to come to grip with a predictable environmental disaster", states clearly that neonicotinoids are being used at a scale not seen since the introduction of DDT, yet with little to no regulation by the EPA. Their extensive use as a seed coating is unregulated by state and federal agencies in any meaningful way. Pesticide coated seeds are not even classified as pesticides and are thus exempt from scrutiny by the FIFRA (Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and

Rodenticide Act). This is totally absurd. The US is trailing distantly behind the EU and the Canadian Provinces of Ontario and Quebec in responsible regulation and mitigation of neonicotinoids. Perhaps more importantly, the use of these toxic and dangerous chemicals defies the basic principles of Integrated Pest Management, as alternatives DO exist.

It has become increasingly apparent that our government agencies cannot or will not perform their mandate to protect citizens' inherent rights to clean air, water, and soil. We must take this upon ourselves and eliminate or at least reduce the amount of chemicals we use on our own landscapes.

When a group of concerned citizens asked that the use of neonicotinoid pesticides and the herbicide glyphosate be regulated or at least monitored in the town of Palm Beach, we were told that government in Tallahassee did not consider this to be within the Town's jurisdiction. How is that even possible? Is a citizen's right to clean air less important than his neighbor's right to spray poison on his hedge - when we know that poison is leaching into our soils and aquifers, and polluting the air we breathe?

It is striking that none of the new science has dispelled fears of major impacts to birds, pollinators, and to humans. Regulators are not regulating; they do not accurately weigh the costs and benefits of this class of insecticides. Let's assist our Palm Beach City Council in leading the way by informing our residents of the dangers of these toxic chemicals and demanding that they are no longer used on our fragile barrier island.