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EPA / USDA Report on Honey Bee Health

May 2, 2013 the USDA and EPA held a media call for the release of the report from The National Stakeholders Conference on Honey Bee Health that was held October 2012. The report released May 1, 2013 summarizes discussions held by the various stakeholders at the two-day conference last fall. To read the entire report go to this link, <http://www.usda.gov/documents/ReportHoneyBeeHealth.pdf>.

The National Pollinator Defense Fund is pleased the Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Department of Agriculture are acknowledging bees are important to the food supply. However, beekeepers heard nothing groundbreaking from this report. While pesticides are listed as one of the four major “culprits” to the bee crisis; the misuse of pesticides is a major factor weakening bee colonies so bee diseases and parasites can take advantage of already weakened pollinators. The report did not connect pathogens to pesticides and the weakening of hives overall. The report did clarify additional study is needed concerning pesticides and honey bees. Specifically, the report acknowledged “semi-field conditions,” and “field conditions” (tier 2 and 3) research “is required.” Why tier 2 and 3 research was not conducted prior to a pesticide

being approved was not addressed in the report. Additionally, the report asks a “most pressing pesticide research” question to determine the actual field-relevant pesticide exposure experienced by bees, and the effects, short-term and long-term, upon the bee and the entire colony.

In support of this “needed” research would be the release of the report from the January 2011 Society of Environmental Toxicology and Chemistry (SETAC) Pellston workshop, “Pesticide Risk Assessment for Pollinators.” It is out of a sense of duty and respect to the people who put in the time and effort on the SETAC report that it should be released. The entire report needs to be published releasing its findings and recommendations. Until the report is published the recommendations are not being implemented.

The National Stakeholders Conference on Honey Bee Health report also states EPA was aware the bee kill incident reporting process is flawed, and they are going to review their process. The EPA acknowledged they must strengthen the incident reporting, investigation, and enforcement related to bee kills. The National Pollinator Defense Fund encourages the EPA and the State Lead Agencies to work with, and support beekeepers who report bee kills. Intimidation and fear have constrained beekeepers from reporting their bee kills. Far too many bee kills are the result of misuse and ignorance of the environmental hazard section of the pesticide label as set-forth under FIFRA. The EPA approves of pesticides and their labels, and under FIFRA guidelines are charged with enforcing the use of pesticides. The National Pollinator Defense Fund firmly states “harvesting the low hanging fruit” is possible through having pesticides applied per the label directions. We believe the short-term and long-term effects upon pollinators would decrease. Colonies would not be so weak that parasites and viruses could easily attack bees.

If it is not “one culprit” causing the collapse of honey bee colonies, but a “complex set of stressors:” nutrition and forage, viruses and parasites, bee breeding, and pesticides, then why not

address the main “stressor.” Pesticides; like insecticides, fungicides, and growth regulators, are highly suspect in causing both direct mortality, and with lower doses may act in pre-lethal ways. Systemic pesticides saturate the entire physical structure of a plant, so the bee is exposed to the pesticide contaminated pollen and nectar. Even herbicides factor into pollinator health as they often are used to kill plants that pollinators need in their diet. In actual field conditions pollinators are under constant pesticide exposure, and not from just a single exposure as done under EPA registration testing, but within a bee’s three mile foraging radius. Pollinators experience multiple applications from adjacent fields, and multiple exposures as commercial honey bees are moved to different areas throughout the country to pollinate crops and produce honey. These real world experiences of pollinators are not considered in the EPA risk assessment process. Many pesticides applied during daylight hours when plants are in bloom, and bees and other pollinators are foraging kill bees outright (per their label warning). The misuse of pesticides in violation of the EPA and manufacturer defined label directions needs to be enforced. And tier 2 and tier 3 research of the effects of pesticides, especially systemic pesticides, on the over-all and long-term health of bee colonies needs to be researched.

The two-day opportunity last October for stakeholders to gather and talk about their concerns for bees, and the stability of the food supply was appreciated, welcomed, and needed. This gathering was an off-shoot of the Colony Collapse Disorder Steering Committee, and as such this report will be synthesized into the CCD Action Plan. These goals will be addressed over the next five to ten years, serving as a reference document for policy makers, legislators, and the public. The concerns of honey bee and pollinator decline are not resolved with this report from, “The National Stakeholders Conference on Honey Bee Health.” Actions are defined: the EPA needs to enforce the FIFRA guidelines pertaining to the application of pesticides. Research is needed, now,

as well as prior to pesticides being approved. Pollinators are dying in the fields, and leaving weak colonies to be undermined by diseases and pests. Pollinators' food supply is diminishing due to mono-agriculture, and the decimation of wildflowers, and natural forage for bees. Five to ten years to implement this action plan is too long for honey bees to continue to suffer under this "complex set of stressors;" bees will not survive the wait. Financially, beekeepers may not make it either. The National Pollinator Defense Fund encourages policy makers, legislators, the public, and anyone who enjoys a strong, healthy, and diverse food supply to support the actions defined in this report: provide funding for EPA to enforce pesticide label application guidelines; put on hold any new pesticide applications until tier 2 and tier 3 research can be completed on pesticides currently in use; support beekeepers when bee kills are reported, and reimburse them for their losses of colonies; provide funding at public universities for pollinator research; and provide funding to support the development of natural forage areas for pollinators (on farmland and on public lands).

The National Pollinator Defense Fund's (NPDF) mission is to defend managed and native pollinators vital to a sustainable and affordable food supply from the adverse impacts of pesticide. For more information about the NPDF visit www.pollinatordefense.org.