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Northwest wildlife refuges to phase out pesticide



FILE - In this May 9 2005, file photo, shows snow geese and Canada geese preparing to land on marsh at the Lower Klamath National Wildlife Refuge near Merrill, Ore. National wildlife refuges in Oregon, Washington, Idaho and Hawaii are phasing out pesticides from the group known as neonicotinoids because they pose a danger to bees and other pollinators. (Jeff Barnard, File/Associated Press)

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GRANTS PASS, Ore. — Federal wildlife refuges in the Northwest and Hawaii will phase out a class of pesticides that are chemically similar to nicotine because they pose a threat to bees and other pollinators key to crop growth.

The region covering Oregon, Washington, Idaho and Hawaii is the first in the agency to ban neonicotinoids. There is room for exemptions, but the goal is to phase out the pesticides by January 2016, U.S. Fish and

Wildlife Service spokeswoman Miel Corbett said Monday.

The agency's pest management policy calls for pest-killing methods that pose the least risk to wildlife, and there is scientific evidence that neonicotinoids kill bees and other pollinators, said Kim Trust, the agency's deputy regional director of refuges.

"We made the decision because we are concerned over the global decline in all pollinators — bees and butterflies," she said.

Pollinators such as domestic honeybees and wild bumblebees and butterflies are vital to the proliferation of domestic crops as well as wild plants, spreading pollen that fertilizes the seed-producing flowers while they gather nectar. Their numbers have been declining worldwide.

Neonicotinoids are commonly applied as a coating on seeds such as corn, wheat, barley and soybeans planted on refuges both as commercial crops and to benefit wildlife, according to Fish and Wildlife Service documents on the ban. More than 13 square miles of national wildlife refuges were planted with crops using neonicotinoids in 2013.

The documents noted that neonicotinoids are taken up throughout the entire plant, and insects are exposed through pollen, water droplets on the plants, and dust released when coated seeds are planted. The effects cause problems for individual bees, as well as bee colonies. The pesticides accumulate in soil and water ecosystems and remain for a long time.

The Center for Food Safety and Center for Biological Diversity had petitioned Fish and Wildlife to ban neonicotinoids on wildlife refuges nationwide, but agency spokeswoman Miel Corbett said the decision was made independently.

Lori Ann Burd of the Center for Biological Diversity said the conservation group hoped the agency would match the European Union with a wider ban.

"In Europe we've seen pesticide bans really work, and pollinator populations are coming back," she said.

The Oregon Department of Agriculture has imposed new restrictions on spraying neonicotinoids on trees after recent bee kills.

