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Ban bee-killing insecticide on all federal land: Guest opinion



Several signs were posted around a Wilsonville Target parking lot during a 2013 memorial event for the 50,000 bumblebees that died in the area. (The Oregonian/Molly Smith)

August 01, 2014 - By Lori Ann Burd

When 50,000 dead bumblebees were discovered in a Wilsonville parking lot last year, Oregonians got a first-hand look at the environmental perils of the highly toxic class of insecticides known as neonicotinoids.

For years research has tied the use of neonicotinoids on crops to the massive honey bee die-offs that threaten our food supply. And the Wilsonville incident offered graphic demonstration that neonicotinoids are also highly toxic to other pollinating insects.

So it seemed like a no-brainer when federal officials in the Portland office of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recently

responded to a legal petition filed by conservation groups calling for restrictions on neonicotinoids with an announcement that use of the pesticides would be banned on national wildlife refuges in the Northwest and Hawaii.

Then on Thursday, the Fish and Wildlife Service announced the ban would be extended to all national wildlife refuges, with use of the pesticides to be phased out by 2016. But as great as it is to see the agency finally taking this important step to protect wildlife in our national refuges, the decision begs an obvious question: Why are we only protecting the birds and bees on national wildlife refuges from the well-documented dangers of these pesticides?

With mounting evidence linking neonicotinoid use to grave environmental impacts, a much-wider U.S. ban is in order.

There's already convincing evidence of the benefits of banning the dangerous pesticides. Italy banned neonicotinoids in 2009, and following the ban Italian officials reported no cases of widespread bee mortality in apiaries near neonicotinoid-free corn crops -- the first such finding in those areas in 10 years. This past December, the European Union voted to enact a ban on neonicotinoids in its 28 member nations, and bees are already making a comeback.

Yet here in the U.S., neonicotinoid seed treatments continue to be used so extensively -- including as seed treatments on 99 percent of all corn seeds -- that the insecticide is getting broadcast across virtually all of America's annual crop acreage, in the process putting meadows, fallow fields, grasslands, woodlands and riparian habitats at risk, according to an EPA assessment.

The environmental risks posed by neonicotinoids are exacerbated by their extremely persistent nature. With half-lives that can range to nearly 7,000 days, neonicotinoid use results in long-term contamination of soils, surface water and groundwater.

Evidence of the damage wrought by the pesticides continues to roll in.

A study released earlier this year showed they are causing major declines in bird populations and they may directly harm dozens of species protected under the Endangered Species Act. And recently the U.S. Geological Survey released a study showing widespread neonicotinoid pollution in Midwest rivers.

With this week's decision to ban the pesticides

in our national wildlife refuges, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service commendably became the first federal agency to take urgently needed action to protect the pollinators we all depend upon.

Logic, and all of the best-available science, suggests that other federal agencies should quickly follow suit.

Lori Ann Burd works in the Portland office of the Center for Biological Diversity. She authored the legal petition submitted by the Center for Food Safety and joined by the Center for Biological Diversity in February calling for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to ban neonicotinoids on federal wildlife refuges.