

The 2016 Pollinator Protection Act – What Does It Mean?

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During the 2016 Legislative session, HB 211/SB 198, also known as the 2016 Pollinator Protection Act, was passed. Even though Governor Hogan didn't sign the bill, it still goes into law. So what does this mean? Does this affect Maryland farmers and agriculture? These are questions that we at Maryland Farm Bureau (MFB) are hearing from our members, farmers and consumers around the state.

During the legislative session, MFB and several other partners worked to show the potential negative effects of this proposed bill on Maryland agriculture. Our main focus was to bring science back to the table and show that by banning neonicotinoids, you weren't necessarily going to help the bees. First, you need to understand how neonicotinoids work. They are a systemic pesticide, meaning they absorb into the plant and don't get into the bug unless the bug eats the plant/leaf. This is why they are so effective in only harming specific bugs that eat the leaves of plants versus the ones that collect the pollen from the plant. Because bees and other pollinators don't eat the plants, the only way to determine if they were being affected was to look at the bee pollen. Data from the Maryland and U.S. Departments of Agriculture found that the bee pollen tested in Maryland had very little to no traces of neonicotinoids.

So what does this mean? It means that the only way to negatively affect bees and other pollinators with a neonicotinoid is to spray it directly on them or their hive. The studies that were used during the bill hearings to prove negative effects of neonics on bees were laboratory studies where they took liquid neonics in different concentrations and dripped it on the backs of the bees. They continued to increase the concentration of neonics until they started to see an effect on the bees. They continued these increases until they found the lethal dosage; which I might add is over 100 times the amount of neonic found in any field study test done in Maryland!

After many weeks of discussion of this bill, the legislators understood that this was not an agriculture problem and removed all areas in the bill that would ban or limit the use of neonics for agricultural uses. Outside of getting the bill killed in committee, this was MFB's primary objective. Unfortunately, there was enough movement to get the rest of the bill passed in both the Senate and the House.

So what is in the rest of the bill? The components that were left in the bill were primarily a ban on the use of neonicotinoids by homeowners for outside spraying of roses, flowers and Emerald Ash Borer. They can still be used inside for the treatment of bed bugs, and other inside pest prevention uses. They can also be used in flea and tick drops/collars.

The bill goes into effect in 2018. So there should be plenty of time for the Maryland Department of Agriculture to determine which products must come off the shelf in Maryland. What can homeowners do to treat for Japanese Beetles, Grubs, Stink Bugs and all the other pests that love to eat your plants? Either call a landscaping company or look for another product that will try to do the job neonics did. They say there are organic products out there that work. Time will tell.