

Common ground needed with bee kill issue

Dear editor:

Today, change is one thing you can count on in almost every aspect of life and business – farming is no exception. Adaptation is the new buzz word when it comes to change, but let's face it – improving processes using innovative solutions to yesterday's problems, adapting to the ever-evolving climate (droughts or too much rain), preparing for market fluctuations and figuring out a way to be competitive as new economies gain production capabilities is standard operating procedure on every farm in Ontario. Agriculture in Ontario has made a lot of gains in the last few decades adhering to this adaptation model. Today, grains are a \$2 billion dollar business in Ontario.

Yet, the critics remain a constant despite the vast improvements in farm practices. Critics of agriculture, who create dissension between neighbours and foster misinformation about farming, prevail. These groups put pressure on governments to take drastic measures like heavy handed bans and rarely look for common ground solutions.

The issues facing the group of beekeepers in parts of Ontario need a common ground solution. Online petitions with electronic signatures from people halfway around the world and a variety of other popular crowd raising techniques that skim over the details have been employed by critics of agriculture. Recently, the Sierra Club published an editorial calling for a ban on seed treatment in response to Dr. Terry Daynard's column on the complexity of the issues facing the beekeepers. Dr. Daynard is a grain farmer and academic who is saying that a ban on seed treatment is a mistake because it overlooks the complexity of issues.

Common solutions can be found. Beekeepers need a healthy brood to make honey and grain farmers need to produce a healthy crop. That is why, when we heard about the issues experienced by the 50 beekeepers in Ontario last year, we immediately reached out to the beekeeping community and convened a multi-stakeholder effort to figure out what we could do

to help out.

Today, the provincial and federal governments, beekeepers, seed dealers, equipment manufacturers and academics are working in a variety of ways to find solutions. The federal government launched an expedited regulatory evaluation of seed treatments. Honey bee health working groups have been formed and money has been allocated to figure out solutions to the issues facing honey bees. Planter manufacturers are working on long-term solutions for dust reduction in the planters they produce, improvements in seed treatment coatings are being worked on, and a new dust reducing fluency agent will be in the marketplace in 2014.

A lot has happened in a short time to figure out some solutions for reducing risk from seed treatments and we are hopeful the same level of effort is being made on the other issues facing bee health. Agriculture is coming together and working together to adapt to changing realities.

Controlling insect damage is something all of agriculture must manage. Beekeepers need products to control mites that spread disease in their brood. Grain farmers need products to ward off insects under the ground that target roots and seeds, stifling growth. There is a system of provincial and federal regulators in place to make sure these products are safe - safe for humans and safe for the surrounding environment including bees. This system is working. Health Canada's re-evaluation of neonicotinoids will look at water, soil and dust exposure risks and the agency will make a decision on the use of these seed treatments based on their findings by 2015.

In the meantime, reducing the risk of unintended exposure is a priority for Grain Farmers of Ontario, especially in the hotspots, as is supporting efforts that will get to the root of what is impacting the honey bee population. Adaptation and sustainable agriculture can be achieved through working together on solutions.

Barry Senft

CEO, Grain Farmers of Ontario