

**Comments for Senate's Standing Committee on Agriculture and Forestry regarding the importance of bees and bee health in the production of honey, food and seed in Canada.**

**Thursday, February 13, 2014**

**By D'Arcy Hilgartner, Grain Growers of Canada Director**

Good morning Mr. Chairman and Committee members. Thank you for inviting Grain Growers to discuss the importance of bee health.

My name is D'Arcy Hilgartner, I am a Grain Growers of Canada Director.

Grain Growers of Canada provides a national voice for over 50,000 active and successful grain, oilseed and pulse producers through its 14 provincial and regional grower groups. We represent wheat, durum, barley, canola, oats, corn, soybeans, peas, beans, lentils, rye, and triticale farmers from across Canada.

Along with my brother, our families and my parents, we farm 7500 acres on a second generation farm near Camrose, Alberta. We grow canola, wheat, peas, barley and flax.

As a farmer, I also have a background in science and use the latest agronomic tools and practices to better my farm operation.

Canadian agriculture success is rooted in environmentally sustainable farm practices using a modern agriculture toolbox. We rely on sound science principles found within Canada's renowned safe regulatory system.

And sustainable farming practices have enabled Canadian farmers to become major contributors to the Canadian economy. The Canadian agriculture and agri-food system is one of the biggest contributors to our economy, accounting for 8 percent of the Canadian GDP in 2010, which is a larger contributor than oil and gas.

From our viewpoint, the issue is clear: farmers and crops need pollinators and pollinators need farmers and crops.

It is a relationship that farmers appreciate.

On my own land I work with my local bee keeper, Russell Severson. We have a great relationship. I look forward to seeing his hives arrive every spring. Russell has steadily increased the size of his operation over the last decade and we now have hundreds of hives in multiple locations on our fields. We work together and communicate on a regular basis, which is the key to any good relationship.

As farmers we need healthy bees.

It is in our best interest. You could even say as farmers we have a vested interest in bee health.

There are 500,000 hives on the prairies and they produce 150 pounds of honey each so that is 75 million pounds of honey annually. A significant amount of this honey production comes from canola so we are glad our colleagues from the canola sector filled you in on the details. According to the Western Producer, August 15, 2013, new scientific research indicates that bees as pollinators help to increase canola yields.

We learn from our local bee keepers that bee health is a complicated issue with numerous factors needing to be considered including disease and winter kill due to harsh Canadian winters.

And similar to crop protection that farmers use to deal with harmful insects, bee keepers also need to deal with invasive species like the varroa mite which is now in both Canada and the United States.

Bees need protection from the varroa mite, likewise my crops need protection from invasive insects that can destroy my yields and my livelihood.

The threat of damage from harmful insects is a common risk that needs to be managed. With beekeepers and farmers the risk of insect damage is mitigated with the tools and technology we have and these are regulated by Health Canada's Pest Management Regulatory Agency.

Seed treatments or neonicotinoids give my crops a healthy start, free of disease and insects and protect my crops like a high energy vitamin drink giving my crops an early life cycle boost, providing the edge to help produce a good harvest.

Farmers need to continue to have a wide range of tools to control aggressive pestilent outbreaks within our crops.

Any restriction of neonicotinoid seed treatments would, in fact, increase the need for foliar spraying. Seed treatments, we feel, is a better option as they put protection directly where you need it most.

Restrictions on seed treatments would majorly affect Canadian farmers' ability to compete with American farmers. At this time in Canada, poor rail service is a critical situation, with farmers unable to sell their crops because of the grain backlog. Spring planting cash flow will be challenging.

This is happening when competition for new markets and maintaining current ones is fierce. Canadian farmers cannot afford any more competitive disadvantages with our American counterparts.

### **More research is needed.**

Farmers have been successfully using neonics since the early 1990s and they continue to be used in other parts of the world. While there have been incidents reported in some regions of Ontario and Quebec, there were over 21.3 million acres of seed-treated canola planted in Canada last year, and there were no reported incidents that we are aware of.

In addition, there were millions of other acres planted with crops that use the seed treatments such as soybeans, and again, no reported incidents.

## **Farmers and bee keepers are working together.**

There has been considerable work done in recent years developing best management practices related to bee health. Grain Growers has worked with the Canadian Honey Council and provincial bee keepers associations, sharing information and ideas.

We have worked with Croplife and also the PMRA on best management practices related to bee health, minimising exposure to dust.

## **Farmers and industry are working together.**

Work is being done on finding long term solutions. Equipment manufacturers are working on pilot projects for installing deflectors on planters in areas of high incidents.

Seed companies have been working on new seed treatment coatings and a new dust reducing fluency agent will be mandatory in the marketplace in 2014.

## **Farmers and bee keepers along with industry are working together.**

Today, grain farmers, government officials, beekeepers, seed dealers, pesticide manufacturers, equipment manufacturers and academics are coming together to work on solutions.

A lot has happened in a very short time looking at bee health challenges, but more work needs to be done.

Grain Growers is a member of an Agriculture Canada steering committee looking at bee health to figure out solutions.

Grain Growers would like to see a national effort in the form of a task force carry forward on bee health, using a holistic approach, involving bee keepers, farmers, industry and academics.

We feel that a sound science approach is needed because modern agriculture tools are helping farmers feed our nation and the world. According to the United Nations, we are told that we need to feed 9 billion people by 2050.

As farmers we are constantly improving how we do things on our farms in order to produce more crops.

In summary:

1. Farmers need healthy bees and bees need our crops. At Grain Growers we will continue to work directly with bee keepers, industry, scientists, government officials and other farmers.

**I will continue to work with my local bee keeper Russell Severson collaboratively.**

2. Controlling harmful insect damage is something all agriculture sectors must manage and in fact is an issue we share with our bee keeper colleagues. Any changes must also be financially sustainable for my farm.
3. The agriculture community is working together to find solutions and the work needs to continue. A formal process by which we can meet with PMRA is also needed to communicate our sustainable farming practices. Farmers, as agriculture stakeholders, need to be part of ongoing studies and we are willing to work with PMRA and beekeepers continuing to develop improvements. In addition, we would like to have access to the data that PMRA has collected so that we can analyze it.

As we move forward looking for solutions, we trust that the Federal Government will continue to make decisions based on a science based lens and sound science principles. Canada's safe regulatory framework is something we need to be proud of and which is in fact viewed with respect in the international community.

Agriculture is a business of balance, managing risk, and working together we will find solutions.

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you. I look forward to your questions.