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Local farmers: education needed regarding pesticides

It may seem harmless.

There are bugs on a plant in a private garden and the owner sprays a pesticide on that one spot. But what happens if the chemicals get in the soil or a honeybee lands on the flower?

The unintended consequences that come with using pesticides are [putting honey bees and other pollinators in danger](#).

“The overuse of them in backyards in suburbia is terrible. Unfortunately, it spreads everywhere” said Tony Lulek, chairman of the Holliston Agricultural Commission and owner of Little Beehive Farm in Holliston.

Earlier this year, President Obama announced an \$82 million program to plant wildflowers and other bee-friendly plants on federal land. Three bills are in front of committee in the Legislature targeting pollinator deaths and pesticide use, including one sponsored by local state Rep. Carolyn Dykema, D-Holliston.

Lulek was at the Statehouse on Thursday to speak in favor of the bills that are now in front of the Joint Committee on Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture.

“The government has really gotten involved,” said Lulek on Friday.

In Ashland, the Board of Health is considering implementing its own pesticide regulations on top of the ones issued by the state and federal government. The proposed local regulations will limit the kinds of pesticides allowed on town-owned properties and suggest pesticides for residents to use on their own properties.

Specifically, Ashland wants to ban the use of pesticides defined as Toxicity Category I and Toxicity Category II by the Environmental Protection Agency on town-owned fields and stick to organic pesticides.

But the big hurdle for advocates for more pesticide control is public awareness.

“People don’t realize they’re causing harm,” said Lulek. “My goal would be to educate people that there’s a choice out there.”

Kathy Halamka and her husband run Unity Farm in Sherborn. They grow heritage apples and blueberries among other crops and have 25 beehives spread across other communities. Of those hives, Halamka sees the most dead bees in front of her hives in Wellesley. She attributes it to overspraying in the town that occurs up to a mile or two away from the hive.

“I know the effects are very visible,” said Halamka, “I can’t control the effects because I can’t control where the bees are going”

Pesticides endanger other pollinators, such as butterflies and hummingbirds. The Holliston Agricultural Commission just opened a butterfly aviary in town next to its community gardens. People with plots in the community garden are not allowed to use pesticides, said Lulek.

Natick Organic Farm is a certified organic farm, meaning it has a buffer zone allowed by the state around its property that prohibits pesticide spraying, said Casey Townsend, assistant director at Natick Community Organic Farm.

The farm also has bees and makes honey, but has not seen dead or sick bees. Townsend said the farm just extracted 90 pounds of summer honey from six hives last week.

Because of its certification, if the Natick farm has problems with insects, it has to go through an approval process to use any pesticides. The permitted pesticides for an organic farm are outlined in a book by the Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI).

A few years ago, the farm was having problems with potato bugs. Instead of killing them with pesticides, the farm used crop rotation and had school groups come and pick the bugs and their eggs off the plants.

Those alternatives are much easier in home gardens, said Townsend.

“On a small scale you’re not attracting large amount of bugs,” he said.

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