

13. State Maintains Loophole Allowing Enormous Pesticide Use to Go Unregulated



Photo: Neonic coated seed, USDA-NRCS/Lance Cheung

Issues:

Neonicotinoids, or “neonics”, are a class of neurotoxic insecticide used all over Minnesota, from lawns to corn fields. **Neonics are best known as a leading cause of pollinator declines, with their expanding use primarily responsible for making U.S. industrial agriculture nearly 48-times more toxic to insects than 25 years ago. But that’s not all:**

- Birds commonly eat neonic-coated seeds, and a review of 200 studies concluded that eating a single seed treated with neonics can kill a songbird’s entire clutch.¹
- Neonics widely contaminate Minnesota’s surface waters and, elsewhere, have been linked with the collapse of fisheries. ²
- Research links neonics to a host of neurological harms like muscle tremors and other health effects including lower testosterone levels, altered insulin regulation, and changes to fat metabolism. ³
- Peer-reviewed research linked exposure to neonics while in the womb to birth defects, such as deformation of the heart and brain and other developmental harms.

In Minnesota, neonics are commonly used as coatings on crop seeds, especially in corn and soybean. Neonics are spread across at least 15 million acres of Minnesota farmland each year through the planting of coated seed – an area the size of West Virginia. **95% or more of the neonics applied to these seeds do not enter the crop as intended;** they remain in the

environment where they contaminate soils, surface waters, groundwater and wild plant life (wildlife forage). 4

As a result, this widespread, wasteful use, neonics broadly contaminate Minnesota's environment. Data from the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) links neonic-treated seed use with water contamination at levels harmful to aquatic life that forms the basis for entire ecosystems, including Minnesota's billion-dollar recreational fishing industry. Testing by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) detects neonics in 94% of the state's white-tailed deer. 5

The harms of neonics were on full display in 2021, when it was discovered that neonic-treated seeds from Minnesota and the Midwest were being improperly processed and stored at a facility in Mead, Nebraska. The surrounding environment was heavily contaminated with neonics, resulting in strange illnesses reported in people, pets and wildlife. 6

Neonic-treated seeds are not only harmful, but unnecessary. Independent research – meaning studies *not* funded by the pesticide industry – consistently show that neonic seed treatments in corn and soybeans do not provide economic benefits to farmers. 7

Minnesota's failure to act:

The Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) is the agency charged with protecting Minnesota's people and environment from the harms of pesticides. Nevertheless, **MDA allows treated seeds to go completely unregulated**, claiming that MDA lacks authority to regulate the number one use of neonics and other harmful pesticides statewide.

MDA has long had authority to regulate treated seeds. If there was any doubt, the legislature in 2023 passed statutory language that granted MDA the clear responsibility to regulate neonicotinoid treated seed to prevent harm to the environment. But to this day, MDA claims it lacks authority to protect Minnesotans from this serious threat and instead continues to parrot pesticide industry talking points on the importance of treated seed.

The MDA, alongside the pesticide industry, claims that neonics are minimally harmful to beneficial insects, birds and mammals while ignoring the FACT that these and other insecticides were formulated to kill living things. The problem is that neonicotinoids kill indiscriminately. 8

In sum, despite decades of research showing the harm of neonic-treated seeds and their lack of benefits for farmers, Governor Walz and the MDA have done nothing to regulate the overuse of these dangerous products. The majority of the population wants a clean environment and healthy food. Minnesotans should be able to rely on government to protect us from pesticide pollution. Instead, state government views agrichemical giants as their "customer" whom they feel obligated to appease.

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