

## Bayer on defensive in bee deaths

German authorities look into allegation that RTP maker's pesticide harms environment

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Bayer CropScience is facing scrutiny because of the effect one of its best-selling pesticides has had on honeybees.

A German prosecutor is investigating Werner Wenning, Bayer's chairman, and Friedrich Berschauer, the head of Bayer CropScience, after critics alleged that they knowingly polluted the environment.

The investigation was triggered by an Aug. 13 complaint filed by German beekeepers and consumer protection advocates, a Coalition against Bayer Dangers spokesman, Philipp Mimkes, said Monday.

The complaint is part of efforts by groups on both sides of the Atlantic to determine how much Bayer CropScience knows about the part that clothianidin may have played in the death of millions of honeybees.

Bayer CropScience, which has its U.S. headquarters in Research Triangle Park, said field studies have shown that bees' exposure to the pesticide is minimal or nonexistent if the chemical is used properly.

Clothianidin and related pesticides generated about \$1 billion of Bayer CropScience's \$8.6 billion in global sales last year. The coalition is demanding that the company withdraw all of the pesticides.

"We're suspecting that Bayer submitted flawed studies to play down the risks of pesticide residues in treated plants," said Harro Schultze, the coalition's attorney.

"Bayer's ... management has to be called to account, since the risks ... have now been known for more than 10 years."

Under German law, a criminal investigation could lead to a search of Bayer offices, Mimkes said.

On the other side of the Atlantic, the Natural Resources Defense Council is pressing for research information on clothianidin.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency approved the pesticide in 2003 under the

condition that Bayer submit additional data. A lawsuit, which the environmental group filed Aug. 19 in federal court in Washington, accuses the EPA of hiding the honeybee data.

The group thinks the data might show what role chlothianidine played in the loss of millions of U.S. honeybee colonies.

Researchers have been puzzled by what is causing the bees to disappear at what is considered an alarming rate.

The phenomenon, known as colony collapse disorder, threatens a \$15 billion portion of the U.S. food supply.

In the U.S. diet, about one in three mouthfuls comes from crops that bees pollinate.

Scientists are looking at viruses, parasites and stresses that might compromise bees' immune system. In the past two years, Congress has earmarked about \$20 million to boost research.

Clothianidin, sold under the brand name Poncho, is used to coat corn, sugar beet and sorghum seeds and protect them from pests. A nerve toxin that has the potential to be toxic for bees, it gets into all parts of the plant that grows from the coated seeds.

In 1999, French regulators banned an older relative of Poncho and subsequently declined approval for clothianidin. French researchers found that bees were a lot more sensitive to the pesticides than Bayer CropScience studies had shown.

Three months ago, German regulators suspended sales of chlothianidine and related chemicals after the family of pesticides was blamed for the destruction of more than 11,000 bee colonies.

The Julius Kühn Institute, a state-run crop research institute in Germany, collected samples of dead honeybees and determined that clothianidin caused the deaths.

Bayer CropScience blamed defective seed corn batches.

The company said that the coating came off as the seeds were sown, which allowed unusually high amounts of toxic dust to spread to adjacent areas where bees collected pollen and nectar.

Bayer paid about \$3 million in damages, Mimkes said.

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