Viewpoint: How proposed legislation billed to ‘save the bees’ will actually harm them — and the economy

The myth about endangered, disappearing honeybees lives on — with potentially dire implications. Rep. Earl Blumenauer, an Oregon Democrat, just reintroduced “Save the Bees” legislation that would eliminate farmers’ most advanced and effective defenses against crop-destroying pests in the name of preventing imaginary bee declines and preserving food security, which the bill would actually undermine.

According to Blumenauer’s press release, “The United States lost an estimated one-third of its honeybee colonies between 2016 and 2018.” This sounds scary, except the Department of Agriculture data says otherwise: There were 2,780,000 honeybee colonies in 2016, compared to 2,828,000 in 2018. The bee pollination business is booming, and U.S. agriculture has never been more productive.

As is often the case in Washington, this legislation would do the opposite of what it claims: It would kill
America’s long-standing technological dominance in agriculture, raise the cost of food, and actually harm bees and other pollinators. That’s because the measure’s ban on neonicotinoids and other innovative insecticides would force farmers to use older pesticides, including “organic” ones that are known to be harmful to bees. Unlike neonicotinoids, these older, inferior chemicals have to be sprayed on fields, rather than applied as seed treatments, and they must be used in much greater quantities because many pests have developed resistance to them.

Moreover, to compensate for greater yield losses due to insect damage and disease without these insecticides, farmers would need to expand their acreage significantly, destroying habitat, which is the greatest cause of declines in pollinators and other insects, while massively increasing greenhouse gas emissions and water consumption.

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Equally bad, the bill would subvert the already in place science-based regulatory process that maintains pollinator and human health. Blumenauer justifies this radical action by citing the Bee Informed Partnership honeybee-loss survey, which claims that “current losses of honey bee colonies are too high to confidently ensure the United States will be able to meet the pollination demands for agricultural crops.”

But that’s not true. While the Bee Informed Partnership did report that honeybee losses were 45% last year, appearing to support Blumenauer’s claim, it doesn’t if one reads beyond the misleading headlines. As the partnership explains, its survey isn’t a count of bees, nor does it mean that the number of bees has been almost halved since last year. It’s only a measure of something called the “turnover rate” of beehives. Bees reproduce rapidly, and beekeepers have always made up for losses by “splitting” and growing new hives. Overall beehive numbers, which is what matters for food security, have been stable since the 1990s.

The turnover rate does, however, suggest that beekeepers face problems — but as the partnership notes, beekeepers report that “the parasitic Varroa destructor mite was the main cause of colony loss over the winter, with commercial beekeepers citing queen issues as a close second.” The story was largely the same for summer numbers. But that won’t be in the doomsday proclamations such as Blumenauer’s, which mispresents the 45% statistic to suggest something ominous.
Additionally, honeybee colonies struggle with health problems because bees are poor at social distancing. Every year, hundreds of thousands of beehives are trucked across the country, an average of 1,100 miles each, to pollinate California’s 1.3 million acres of almond trees. According to a new USDA report, that causes the pollinators significant stress and health problems.

Altogether, it takes about 70% of all the bee colonies in the U.S. to pollinate almonds. Bringing all these bees together into proximity creates a central focus for the transmission of diseases, particularly the parasitic varroa mite and the many viral and fungal pathogens it vectors into hives. Not surprisingly, transported bees are found to have noticeably shorter lifespans.

Finally, the data obtained by the Bee Informed Partnership is skewed. Participation is voluntary, and only 1.1% of the responses came from commercial beekeepers. The vast majority (96.1%) were “backyard beekeepers,” who often neglect to treat their hives for Varroa — a “deadly decision” that puts hives “for miles around” in danger.
Although the partnership is certainly aware its survey is being misrepresented, it appears to relish the spotlight that comes from attention-grabbing but deceptive headlines. Unfortunately, those headlines play into the hands of anti-pesticide organizations that are boosters of Blumenauer’s legislation. Many of those activists enjoy generous funding from the organic industry.

If this bill becomes law, just from the loss of neonics, consumers could expect to pay around $4 billion more per year in increased food prices as farmers’ yields plunge from insect damage.

Big Organic is just fine with that. Its Washington, D.C., lobbying arm, the National Organic Coalition, which works hand-in-glove with anti-pesticide groups such as the Center for Food Safety, is listed as one of the bill’s supporters and is clearly a major force behind this legislation. Hiking the cost of conventional food makes overpriced “organic” look like less of a bad deal — which is what the buzz is really about.

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