Following Europe’s lead, New York State is poised to ban most uses of neonicotinoid pesticides. Here’s why that will hurt consumers, farmers â?? and the environment.

The state of New York is on the brink of a banning a pesticide that is critical for many farmers. Last week, legislators passed the “Birds and Bees Protection Act,” which would prevent growers from accessing neonicotinoids, aka “neonics,” a commonly used class of insecticides considered one of the worldâ??s environmentally safest. The bill awaits the governor’s signature.

There is no safer replacement product nor one as effective.

In order to make the legislation less objectionable, it was amended to allow the sale of neonics on a product-by-product basis unless the stateâ??s Department of Environmental Conservation provides a written justification for emergency use every year. This might seem like a good political compromise: Urban liberal politicians can say they did something for their constituents, and conservatives, many of whose constituents are farmers in rural areas, can say they did their best and prevented an outright ban.

However, this â??solutionâ?? will end badly for growers and the food system. How can I predict that? The experiment has already been run: For the past five years, an identical scenario has been playing out among European growers, politicians, and anti-pesticide activist groups. Spoiler alert: this saga has proven catastrophic for growers, birds, bees, consumers, and the environment â?? and the same would be true in New York.

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Europe’s neonic bans

In 2018, the European Commission banned neonicotinoids except for emergency-authorized uses (aka “derogations”) greenlighted by EU member countries. Similar to New York, it resulted from anti-pesticide activists spreading bogus “bee-pocalypse” fears among the public and Green Party members working in concert to usher in anti-pesticide legislation.

These derogations were a lifeline for many growers, as there were no other viable pesticides as safe and effective. European sugar beet growers have been devastated by the neonics ban. By 2020, farmers across 10 EU countries clamored for â?? and received â?? 21 derogations to protect their sugar beet crops from aphids spreading â??beet yellows virus,â?? a disease that decimated up to 80 percent of crop yields.
But Europe’s anti-pesticide activists were unsatisfied, just as New York’s activists will be. Almost immediately after the first derogations were instituted and without any regard for the consequences, advocacy groups teamed with organic farmers to launch a well-financed campaign to block derogations. Although neonics are the only class of pesticides that can contain beet weevils. With the backing of green groups, European organic farmers began filing lawsuits to annul them. Earlier this year, the European Union Court of Justice, the EU’s equivalent of the U.S. Supreme Court, ruled in favor of the activists. Neonic derogations immediately became illegal in Europe.

The economic consequences of the ban have been catastrophic. Many farmers and scientists believe the ban is more ideology than science, as there are no replacements that work or as safe. European sugar beet farmers are now growing other less profitable crops instead. Predictably, Europe’s sugar industry is in free fall. Beet weevils have destroyed 40,000 acres and caused a loss of 60,000 tons of sugar in Austria alone. France’s sugar beet production just hit a 14-year low, and analysts blame the ban. A French sugar giant Tereos hammered another nail in the European sugar’s coffin by recently announcing it will close its sugar refinery operations in France, resulting in more than 120 job losses.
Ironically, bees don’t pollinate sugar beet plants. They are pollinated by wind, like many of New York’s major crops, including corn, wheat, and potatoes. Other major New York vegetable crops, like tomatoes and peppers, are self-pollinated. Thus, even if neonics were toxic to bees (which they’re not), the bees wouldn’t be exposed to them on the many crops that they don’t pollinate.

Growers in Europe who did have alternatives simply sprayed more pesticides usually older and less environmentally friendly chemicals. Before the neonic ban, growers sprayed their crops on average 2.4 times per hectare each season. After the ban, they sprayed pesticides 3.6 times on average, mostly with chemicals in the more indiscriminate bug-killing classes: pyrethroids and carbamates. That’s 1.145 million more pesticide applications per season sprayed on bees, birds, and the rest of the environment.
The same thing will happen in New York. Instead of strategically coating seeds with a tiny amount of pesticide and burying them in the ground where birds and bees can’t access them, farmers will be forced to spray even more pesticides indiscriminately above ground. Because these are complicated scientific issues, regulatory agencies like the states’ Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) should be making pesticide decisions, not politicians and the environmental groups pressuring them.

The DEC has the scientific expertise to make regulatory determinations, and so far, they along with the U.S. EPA and many other regulatory agencies throughout the world have determined that neonics are safe for farmers to use. Their science-based reviews have been ignored. The activists making their case to the US media and politicians that neonics are driving bee deaths.

But most entomologists disagree. Neonics are not a significant factor in bee deaths. The scientific consensus is that varroa mite and other pests that carry disease into hives are the primary threat to bees. Since neonics were first used in the mid-1990s, honeybee populations have grown by 51,000 colonies in the U.S.; and there are nearly 21 million more bee hives in the world now than in 2000. Worldwide, honeybee numbers are at an all-time high.

Capitalizing on their victories in Europe, anti-chemical activists in the US are now targeting legislatures, state by state. A warning to New York’s agriculture industry: your crops and livelihoods will also be threatened if the bill is signed into law. The question now is whether Governor Hochul will stand up for her state’s farmers and consumers and veto it.
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