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Research finds insect colonies are at risk

Bees threatened by crop spraying

PESTICIDES used on crops could be putting bee colonies at risk, which could jeopardise the multi-billion-dollar contribution these flying insects make to agriculture.

Research from Britain's Nature journal suggests bees could be exposed to a number of pesticides while they forage.

The study found the exposure of bumblebees to two pesticides at real-world levels impaired behaviour and increased the likelihood of death which, in turn, hurt the entire colony.

Although bees in Britain faced a greater threat of encountering the chemicals as farming intensified, Australian pollinating bees were not immune.

Professor Boris Baer, of the University of Western Australia's Centre for Integrative Bee Research, said the loss of Australia's bee population would cost national primary industries $4 billion–$6 billion.

"About 80 different crops depend on honey bee pollination," Prof Baer said.

"Without bees you have lower yields or no yields at all."

Even beef production relied on pollination to ensure livestock had enough fodder to consume.

He said because Australian farming had a lower density compared to the United Kingdom, the implications were milder. But he warned that pesticides should go through further testing to ensure little or no effect on the bee population.

"The bees are a very complex system," he said.

"It's a super organism.

"The only solution is to use chemicals in agriculture that do not harm them at all."

Professor Boris Baer
About 80 different crops depend on honey bee pollination.

BEE CONCERNED: Chemicals can damage bee populations that are essential to farming. PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED

BEE FACTS

How much do your crops rely on bees?

ESSENTIAL:
Kiwifruit, passionfruit, macadamia, watermelon, rockmelon, pumpkin, squash and zucchini

GREATLY:
Apples, mangoes, blackberries and related berries, cherries, plums, avocado, almonds, canola and cucumber

MODERATELY:
Cotton, coffee, faba bean, soya bean, sunflower, chestnut