

Public Relations Campaign

Protect the Birds

Do the Right Thing

Background

Songbird populations are declining in the upper Midwest. So are endangered species like the sharp tailed grouse. Is it caused by the use of insecticides on crop seeds?

September 20, 2017 - Minnesota Public Radio (MPR) released a report on how neonicotinoids affect songbirds and other small animals as well as honeybees. The use of this insecticide to protect crop seed is common and no matter how hard a grower tries, a little corn seed will spill out of his planter from time to time. The seed remains on the top of the soil where small birds and animals can eat the seed. The question MPR addressed was how many spills occur in the state of Minnesota? The University of Minnesota conducted a preliminary test by observing newly planted corn fields. They surveyed 38 Minnesota townships and estimated a total of 15,000 large seed spills in one season. In order to be counted as a large seed spill, it had to be observed from the road and contain a few thousand seeds. Many spills remained uncounted.

It is hard to prove that the correlation between loss of songbird populations is directly correlated to the spilled seed issue. Concerned advocacy groups have conducted statistical correlation studies that are convincing enough to cause a response from the Agriculture community.

The Ag industry formed a consortium reporting to the EPA last year on their plan to deal with this problem. In Europe and Canada, the plan was coopted by the regulatory bodies and a total ban of neonicotinoids has been issued. This will leave growers without the use of an important insecticide. The consortium resolved their process in December of 2018 and issued a report. Language on the bag tag that spilled seed should be buried at the end of the rows has been accepted by the EPA. An unintended consequence of this decision is to put the responsibility and liability on the farmer's back to protect wildlife from the treated seed.

The truth is that more than just neonics are capable of causing trouble with small animals and birds. Some other insecticides and fungicides are toxic enough by themselves, but when all of them are added together in some seed treatment combinations, there is reason for concern. Arkion believes a real solution is at hand by using our newest formulation of a seed treatment repellent. Testing is concluded at the National Wildlife Research Center (USDA) in Ft Collins CO. Dr. Scott Werner can confirm that the use of the new formulation used in a low concentration will deter accidental take by small birds. Arkion has also been issued a new patent on the same active ingredient as an effective rodent repellent. 2019 will see the final development and subsequent filing of a new label through the EPA for these applications to make treated seed safer for wildlife in general.

Arkion's Background

Arkion is a biotechnology company based in New Castle Delaware. Arkion develops, patents and sells new active materials for animal feeds and repellents. Arkion owns Biotechnical Resources in Manitowoc Wisconsin for process improvement in fermentation technologies.

Arkion began working on an effective bird repellent in 1994 as part of a joint venture between DuPont and ConAgra. The co-development of new technologies in this area was shared with the International Crane Foundation and the National Wildlife Research Center (USDA). The ICF needed a non-lethal answer for corn growers in the Wisconsin, Minnesota and Michigan area for the spreading crane populations. The USDA had been in search of an effective non-lethal bird repellent for grain crops for over 30 years. The first EPA labels for Avipel were issued in 2004 for corn seed treatment. There was a Canada Goose repellency label issued too under the tradename Flight Control in 1998 for use on turf. There are now 32 states using Avipel for corn and rice seed for a variety of birds from cranes, to blackbirds, crows to pheasants.

The newest formulations promise to allow low treatment rates for achieving a repellency of target species and a deterrence at even lower rates for non-target birds and animals. Over the next few years, more work will be done in cooperation with the National Wildlife Research Center in Ft. Collins to bring mammal repellents to the stage that can also be used to safe seed.

Implementation of a communication strategy to the stakeholders concerned about wildlife

There is a list of concerned organizations from the wildlife protection community including Audubon, Sierra Club and local organizations in Minnesota, Michigan and Wisconsin. There is also an important need to include the Corn Growers' Association in each state in the early phase of this program. Although there is not a natural relationship between corn growers and wildlife preservation associations, this topic might provide a reason for common cause. By combining efforts, growers will be able to protect the current use of seed treatments and protect wildlife at the same time.

What action is needed?

Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan could require seed companies to certify treatment of corn seed to make the seed safe for songbirds. What form of requirement is up to each state. There could be a Songbird Safe label issued by vendors of properly treated seed. Departments of Natural Resources could monitor seed spills and growers with certification of proper treatment would be able to document compliance. The program could be voluntary initially to see how much compliance takes place.

Doing the Right Thing does not have to cost much and there is a real answer to this issue.