

# Inside Quebec's fight over bee-killing pesticides

By Marc Fawcett-Atkinson | News | January 31st 2025

Share



Quebec farmer Jocelyn Michon stopped using seeds coated with neonicotinoid pesticides around 2015 to protect the beneficial insects on his farm, and hasn't looked back. Photo by provided by Jocelyn Michon

---

**Get daily news from Canada's National Observer**

Your email address

Sign up

Not tobacco. Not alcohol. He quit using insecticide-coated seeds in his fields of corn and soy, an unorthodox move among non-organic grain farmers.

Like thousands of other North American farmers, for years he sowed his fields with seeds coated in neonicotinoids (neonics, for short), the world's most common insecticides. Manufacturers long advertised that treating the seeds protects them from pests and boosts crop yields, a [claim now in dispute](#). They also come with a huge downside – they kill pollinators needed for crop fertilization and have recently been shown to [harm human health](#).

As much as a decade ago, Michon knew the chemicals were controversial because they kill insects he relied on to grow a healthy crop. But he was concerned about his financial bottom line. Even though the treated seeds harmed beneficial insects, the common wisdom is the tradeoff is worth it. Besides, he had no way to buy untreated seeds. His local seed supplier didn't sell them – so he just went with the flow.

That changed in 2015 when he attended a Quebec farmers' conference and heard a talk by biologist-entomologist Geneviève Labrie, then a researcher with the Centre de Recherche sur les Grains (CÉROM), a research organization supported by the province's agriculture ministry and grain growers' council.

She told the crowd that her research showed neonic-treated seeds didn't boost yields, except in exceptional circumstance. Neonic-treated seeds also harm predatory insects like ground beetles that Michon relied on to kill pests naturally.

"I need useful insects," he told *Canada's National Observer* in French. "I don't want to destroy them."

Initially, he struggled to find untreated seeds. But everything changed by 2019, when Quebec introduced groundbreaking rules banning neonics, including treated seeds, unless prescribed by an agronomist. The rules were a North American first and marked a rare defeat for Canada's \$2.5-billion pesticide industry which [has lobbied fiercely](#) to keep neonic use widespread nationwide.

After the ban, the pesticide companies launched another backdoor attack: they replaced their neonic seed coatings with diamides — a group of insecticides particularly deadly to ecologically important aquatic organisms. Within a year, diamides were showing up in provincial pesticide water monitoring data.

---

**Observers say Quebec's battle against neonics shows what's possible when it comes to regulating the chemicals —and raises questions about the federal pesticide regulator's controversial 2021 decision to keep them on the market.**

---

This month, to close that loophole, Quebec banned the use of all

**Get daily news from [Canada's National Observer](#)**

align with the 2026 seed-buying season, said Jacques Fadou, an agronomist with the province's environment ministry.

"We want to break the systematic use of these types of products," he explained.

Observers say Quebec's battle against neonics shows what's possible when it comes to regulating the chemicals —and raises questions about the federal pesticide regulator's controversial 2021 decision to keep them on the market after proposing a ban five years earlier.

"The fact Quebec has been able to restrict these pesticides makes it even harder to understand why Canada is seemingly bending over backwards to meet the industry's demands to keep them in widespread use elsewhere in the country," said Lisa Gue, senior policy analyst for the David Suzuki Foundation.

But the fight to get to this point took years, and the industry didn't take the opposition lying down. Instead, it rallied a multifaceted attack against unfavourable research — and the people doing it, resulting in a scandal that rocked the province and exposed part of the pesticide industry's playbook to keep their products in use.

### **'Non-stop criticism'**

No one deserves more credit for Quebec's rules than Labrie.

In 2008, she was a freshly-minted PhD and had just been hired by

**Get daily news from Canada's National Observer**

ministry's agronomists, which had largely avoided scrutiny by the province.

"My presentation to the (ministry) hit a nerve for many people, because no one had grasped just how harmful neonics were to the environment," she explained in French.

Minimal transparency at Canada's federal Pest Management Regulatory Agency (PMRA) meant the province didn't have a clear sense of how often farmers used neonic-treated insecticides. And because the pesticides weren't considered highly problematic, they weren't included in the province's freshwater pesticide monitoring program.

Spooked by Labrie's warnings, the government started looking for neonics — and found them in 100 per cent of the Quebec waterways they tested.

Meanwhile, in 2012, Labrie started studying whether preventative neonic seed coatings actually lived up to manufacturers' claims they boost yields. She found they didn't: 95 per cent of the time, neonic-treated seeds did nothing, even as they leached deadly pesticides into the province's waterways.

"My results were very controversial," she recalled. "It was hard to receive non-stop criticism because of my work."

The ubiquitous presence of neonics in Quebec waterways convinced officials they needed to break the "systematic" use of neonics on fields without preventing farmers from accessing them if necessary. That inspired the idea now enshrined in the province's rules on neonics that

**Get daily news from [Canada's National Observer](#)**

The new rules put a layer of distance between the manufacturers and unlimited sales of pesticide-treated seeds: agronomists in Quebec are regulated by a professional code that is independent from pesticide companies, even if they work for seed retailers.

## The scandal

Pesticide producers like Croplife didn't lean on Fadou and his team to back off on the new rules, but Labrie and her colleagues weren't as lucky. From 2013 to 2017, they faced pressure and harassment from the pro-pesticide lobby.

In 2014, she tried to collaborate on research about the effectiveness of neonics with Croplife, Canada's primary agrichemical lobby group. The organization's researchers threw up roadblocks to her research at every turn, and ignored her request to remove data she collected for the

---

said the organization and its members conduct research “according to internationally accepted protocols, and we uphold the highest ethical standards in all that we do.”

Petelle's statement said the research Labrie had conducted “more than a decade ago,” which showed coated seeds were usually not effective, “further demonstrated the difficulty in consistently predicting soil pest pressures...We've seen farmers in Quebec continue to make the choice to use treated seed because they see the benefits of it.”

that rocked Quebec in 2018. Robert, a career agronomist with the province's agriculture ministry, was fired after leaking an internal briefing note to reporters. The note outlined how CÉROM's then-president Christian Overbeek and other executives tried to stop Labrie and her colleagues from talking about their neonic findings.

Overbeek was — and remains — head of the Quebec grain growers' lobby and was a registered lobbyist advocating against restrictions on neonic seed coatings. This resistance included telling Labrie and her colleagues not to publish their results in scientific journals, and repeatedly publicly contradicting her findings, [according to \*Le Devoir\*](#).

The situation got so bad that Labrie and several colleagues resigned in 2017.

Public outrage over the case led Premier François Legault to apologize publicly and offer Robert his job back or compensation.

An investigation by Quebec's Auditor General slammed Overbeek for overstepping ethics rules and violating provincial conflict of interest provisions by trying to silence Labrie and her colleagues. Following the scandal, the Quebec government replaced the organization's executive board and restructured the organization.

Now a consultant, she's working on a project assessing how mixing buckwheat into grain fields can be a natural pest deterrent.

Since the study came out, Labrie and Quebec's environment ministry are regularly asked for advice by other jurisdictions hoping to emulate the province's restrictions, including U.S. states like Vermont and New

**Get daily news from [Canada's National Observer](#)**

devoting [an entire day on Capitol Hill](#) to pre-empting local bans on neonics and other pesticides.

"There are a lot of farmers ... who don't want insecticide-treated seeds," Labrie said. "They just want tools to protect their crops, or help in using alternative techniques. Most farmers don't want to harm the environment."

---

January 31st 2025



Marc Fawcett-Atkinson  
Journalist

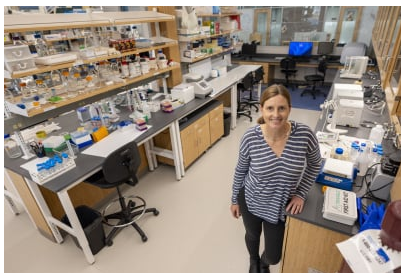
---

## Keep reading



### **Exclusive: How a federal agency colluded with a pesticide maker to silence a Canadian researcher**

By Marc Fawcett-Atkinson | News | October 17th 2024



### **Calls for Canada to ban bee-killing pesticides after damning CNO investigation**

By Marc Fawcett-Atkinson | News | November 27th 2024

Get daily news from **Canada's National Observer**