Dear Governor Hochul, Speaker Heastie, President Pro Tempore and Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins, and Chairs Englebright, Gottfried, Kaminsky, Hoylman, and Rivera:

The undersigned environmental health scientists and health professionals write to express our concerns regarding neonicotinoid pesticides, which present a variety of health risks to people—especially children. We strongly support A7429/S699B, known as the Birds and Bees Protection Act, which would eliminate the unnecessary and harmful neonic uses that account for the vast majority of neonic entering New York’s environment.

Neonicotinoids, or “neonics,” are a class of neurotoxic insecticides commonly used in a wide variety of settings. They are so popular, in fact, that they are the most commonly used class of insecticides nationwide. Neonicotinoids act as neurotoxic chemicals by permanently binding to a cellular receptor, causing overstimulation of cells, and eventually paralysis and death of the exposed insect. Problematically, these same receptors populate the cells of the brain and nervous system across species—including people—prompting concern that neonics pose potentially serious risks to human health.

While more research is needed to fully understand the health effects of neonics, there is already enough evidence to warrant taking action to reduce neonic exposures:

(1) Case reports confirm poisonings in people using neonic products. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) collects reports of pesticide poisonings. Over the last ten years, EPA has received over 1600 reports of people and pets being poisoned with imidacloprid, one type of neonic. Reported symptoms include muscle tremors, difficulty breathing, memory loss, and more. These symptoms are tell-tale signs of poisoning with a neurotoxic chemical.
(2) Epidemiologic studies link neonic exposure to elevated risks of congenital malformations and neurodevelopmental abnormalities. Epidemiologic studies in exposed populations link neonic exposure with birth defects affecting the heart and brain, autism-like symptoms, and other neurodevelopmental conditions.

(3) Animal toxicology studies report harmful reproductive and neurodevelopmental effects. For example, studies have found that exposure to neonics was linked with low sperm count, reduced testosterone, increased incidence of abnormal sperm, and other reproductive problems in tested animals. Neurological effects such as reduced thyroid function, structural changes in the brain, and impaired reflexes have also been reported in studies of lab animals and exposed wildlife. A study of exposed white-tailed deer also observed congenital malformations and higher rates of death for prenatally exposed fawns.

Exposure to neonics is widespread. A survey by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that over half the U.S. population had traces of neonics in their urine, indicating recent exposure. This exposure could be from contact with treated areas like lawns, contaminated water, or from contaminated foods including non-organic cherries, apples, pears, spinach, and even baby food.

Chemicals that impact the developing nervous system, like lead and mercury, have no safe level of exposure during pregnancy and early life development. The brain and nervous system have very little capacity for repair, so exposures that occur during development can lead to neurological decrements that last a lifetime. For this reason, using pesticides designed to affect the nervous system is a terrible idea. In a recently published op-ed, Dr. Philip Landrigan, MD, warned against the continued use of neonics, writing, “We understand that lead and all other neurotoxic chemicals cause brain damage at even the very lowest levels of exposure — reducing children’s intelligence, lowering IQ, shortening attention span, and disrupting behavior. The problem is that while we waited for this evidence and deferred preventive action, lead remained on the market. Millions of children were needlessly exposed to lead in that time and suffered permanent damage. We cannot allow that sorry history to repeat itself.”

A7429/S699B would:

- Ban neonic-treated corn, soybean, and wheat seeds, which account for roughly three quarters of the neonics used in New York agriculture, but which a recent in-depth Cornell University review of over 1,100 peer-reviewed papers finds provide “no overall net income benefit” to growers;
- Ban most non-agricultural, turf and ornamental neonic uses;
- Direct the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) to designate outdoor neonic products as "restricted use," meaning they can only be purchased and used by trained and certified pesticide applicators; and
- Preserve DEC authority to allow neonic use to treat harmful invasive species, like emerald ash-borer or hemlock wooly adelgid.

Given the evidence suggesting possible neurological harms associated with neonics, the unnecessary neonic uses targeted by A7429/S699B are simply unjustifiable. We encourage swift passage of this bill, which would reduce harmful human exposures to these toxic compounds in New York.
Respectfully,*

David Carpenter, MD
Professor; Director, Institute for Health and the Environment
State University of New York at Albany

Dr. Stephen De Waal Malefyt, MD
Pediatrician and Director, Albany Children’s Environmental Health Center
Albany Medical Center

Maida P. Galvez, MD, MPH
Past President
New York State District 2 Chapter 3 American Academy of Pediatrics

Alycia Halladay, PhD
Chief Science Officer
Autism Science Foundation

Philip J. Landrigan, MD, MSc, FAAP
Director, Program for Global Public Health and the Common Good
Director, Global Observatory on Pollution and Health
Professor of Biology, Schiller Institute for Integrated Science and Society
Boston College, MA
Professor Emeritus of Pediatrics and Preventive Medicine
Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai

Bruce P. Lanphear, MD, MPH
Professor of Children’s Environmental Health
BC Children’s Hospital
Simon Fraser University

Kathleen Nolan, MD, MSL
Senior Research Director, Catskill Mountainkeeper
Co-founder, Concerned Health Professionals of New York
Board Member, Physicians for Social Responsibility, NY

Robert Oswald, PhD
James Law Professor of Molecular Medicine
Department of Molecular Medicine, Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine

Micah Resnick, MD
Assistant Professor of Pediatrics
Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai

* Academic/University affiliation is provided for identification purposes only and does not constitute institutional endorsement.
Perry Sheffield, MD, MPH
Co-Chair of the Committee on Environmental Health
New York State District 2 Chapter 3 American Academy of Pediatrics
Physicians for Social Responsibility, New York Chapter

Adrienne Wald, EdD, MBA RN
Associate Professor of Nursing
Mercy College - Dobbs Ferry, NY

Elie Ward, MSW
Director of Policy & Advocacy
NYS American Academy of Pediatrics, Chapters 1, 2 & 3

Lauren Zajac, MD, MPH
Co-Chair of the Committee on Environmental Health
New York State District 2 Chapter 3 American Academy of Pediatrics

Natasha Anushri Anandaraja, MD, MPH

Michelle Bamberger, MS, DVM
Retired

Jasmine Bhatia, MD

Kathryn Carey, BSN
Registered Nurse

Cappy Collins, MD, MPH
Executive Director
Nullary Care, Inc.

Christine Collins, BS, AAS
Registered Nurse

Frances Crosby, EdD
Asst. to Provost for Nursing Education
Jessica Ho, MPH
Columbia University

Sarah Evans, PhD, MPH

Katie Huffling, RN, MS, CNM, FAAN
Executive Director
Alliance of Nurses for Healthy Environments

William Jordan, MD, MPH
Clinical Assistant Professor
Albert Einstein College of Medicine
Betty Kolod, MD

Gary Krigsman, MD
Public Health Pediatrician (Retired)

Regina Lacsa, BSN
Registered Nurse

Laurie Laugeman, BSN
BSN, RN, HNB-BC, HWNC-BC, Chapter Leader
Western New York Chapter of the American Holistic Nurses Association

Linda Luciano, MS

Dylan Macciola, BS

Maureen Miller, MD, MPH

Kit O’Ma, MA, RN, HNBC-BC, HWNC-BC, CHT

Helen Pham, BSN
Registered Nurse, Telemetry

Anuj Rao, MD

Barton Schoenfeld, MD, FACC
Albany Medical Center

Sarah Townley, MSN, MPH

Bruce Trigg, MD
Pediatrician and Public Health Consultant

Jessica Varghese, PhD, RN

Lauren Wessler, MD

Ana White, BSN, RN
Care Team Supervisor
Advantage Care Physicians

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