

23.03.2017, Damian Carrington

Europe poised for total ban on bee-harming pesticides

Exclusive: Draft regulations seen by the Guardian reveal the European commission wants to prohibit the insecticides that cause ‘acute risks to bees’

The world’s most widely used insecticides would be banned from all fields across Europe under draft regulations from the European commission, seen by the Guardian.

The documents are the first indication that the powerful commission wants a complete ban and cite “high acute risks to bees”. A ban could be in place this year if the proposals are approved by a majority of EU member states.

Bees and other pollinators are vital for many food crops but have been declining for decades due to habitat loss, disease and pesticide use. The insecticides, called neonicotinoids, have been in use for over 20 years and have been linked to serious harm in bees.

A fierce battle has been fought between environmental campaigners and farming and pesticides groups. The latter argue the insecticides are vital for crop protection and that opposition to them is political.

The EU imposed a temporary ban on the use of the three key neonicotinoids on some crops in 2013. However, the new proposals are for a complete ban on their use in fields, with the only exception being for plants entirely grown in greenhouses. The proposals could be voted on as soon as May and, if approved, would enter force within months.

The 2013 ban went ahead after those nations opposing the measure, including the UK, failed to muster enough votes. However, since then, the UK government seems to have softened its opposition, having rejected repeated requests from British farmers for “emergency” authorisation to use the banned pesticides.

“The amount of scientific evidence on the toxicity of these insecticides is so high that there is no way these chemicals should remain on the market,” said Martin Dermine, at Pesticide Action Network Europe, which obtained the leaked proposals and shared them with the Guardian. “PAN Europe will fight with its partners to obtain support for the proposal from a majority of member states.” A petition to ban neonicotinoids, from Avaaz, has gathered 4.4m signatures.

There is a strong scientific consensus that bees are exposed to neonicotinoid pesticides in fields and suffer serious harm from the doses they receive. There is only a little evidence to date that this harm ultimately leads to falls in overall bee populations, though results from major field trials are expected soon.

However, the European commission (EC) has decided to move towards implementing a complete ban now, based on risk assessments of the pesticides by the European Food Safety Authority (Efsa), published in 2016.

Efsa considered evidence submitted by the pesticide manufacturers but the EC concluded that “high acute risks for bees” had been identified for “most crops” from imidacloprid and clothianidin, both made by Bayer. For thiamethoxam, made by Syngenta, the EC said the company’s evidence was “not sufficient to address the risks”.

Paul de Zylva, at Friends of the Earth, said: “The science is catching up with the pesticide industry – the EU and UK government must call time on neonics. Going neonic-free puts farmers more in control of their land instead of having to defer to advice from pesticide companies.”

However, Sarah Mukherjee, chief executive of the Crop Protection Association, which represents pesticide makers, said: “We are disappointed with this [EC] proposal, which seems more of a political judgement than sound science.”

She said the Efsa assessments were based on what the CPA sees as unworkable guidance that did not have formal approval from EU countries: “The proposal is based on an assessment using the unapproved Bee Guidance document and perfectly illustrates the consequences of using this guidance. Most crop protection products, including those used in organic agriculture, would not pass the criteria.”

UN experts denounce 'myth' pesticides are necessary to feed the world

Matt Shardlow, chief executive of the charity Buglife, welcomed the proposed ban: “Efsa confirmed over 70 high risks from neonicotinoid treated cereal seeds.” He said the pesticides can persist in soils and that the ban should also cover greenhouses as a precaution.

Earlier in March, UN food and pollution experts issued a severely critical report on pesticides, arguing that it was a myth they were needed to feed the world and calling for a new global convention to control their use. “Given the failure of the pesticide industry to address, or even acknowledge, the ecological disaster caused by neonicotinoid pesticides, we agree that there is an urgent need for a new global convention,” said Shardlow.