A new chance for EU member states to improve the protection of bees

BeeLife

EU Member States continue to postpone the adoption of an EFSA guidance document which envisages improved protection of bees from dangerous pesticides. After its failure to adopt the 2013 Bee Guidance document last October, the Standing Committee on Pesticides (SCoPAFF) has a new chance to revindicate its commitment to the protection of bees, pollinators and biodiversity. The committee will hold a new session on phytopharmaceuticals on December 12 & 13, giving them a chance to stand right with bees and prove their commitment before the end of 2018.

Earlier this year, Member States took a historic step to protect pollinators by voting to ban all outdoor uses of three neonicotinoid substances. Therefore, a lack of will to further improve protection measures seems illogical, mainly since it involves the implementation of a guidance document that the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) has drafted as a necessary step to update the assessment methods of the risks that pesticides pose to bees. The same document, in fact, served as the foundation for the restriction of neonicotinoids in 2013 and their ban earlier this year. Five years later after its publication, it is time for Member States to adopt the document, thus continuing to strengthen the protection of bees and pollinators in the EU.

While the ban on neonicotinoids was cause for celebration, it was not the final effort towards improved bee protection. Actually, several other bee-harming products continue to be released into the market and the fields, and authorities do not count with the necessary tools to assess their risks. Products containing deltamethrin, cypermethrin, chlorpyrifos, as well as newer substances as sulfoxaflor, cyantraniliprole, flupyradifurone, continue to worry researchers, environmentalists and beekeepers. These substances have been shown to affect bees, having a negative impact on their health through acute or chronic toxicity.

Hence, current challenges regarding bee health require a more comprehensive range of assessment for substances. EFSA has provided the Bee Guidance Document to tackle previous deficiencies in risk assessment, and now it is just a matter to make use of such a valuable tool.

President of BeeLife, Francesco Panella, stated that "Member states must be coherent. It is not possible that politicians continue to enact a favourable attitude towards the protection of bees, but that it is not followed by the necessary measures to have real changes. The only hurdle for EFSA's guidance document to be adopted is the lack of political will by Member States. It is

time to put other interests aside and to set their priorities straight. Our bees, our pollinators and the biodiversity of our fields depend on it".

Next week can be a turning point for Europe. The adoption of the EFSA's Bee Guidance Document would not only improve risk assessment of bee-harming products but will also send a strong message that the European community is setting out important measures towards the protection of bees, other pollinators and their role within nature.

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NOTE TO EDITORS: BeeLife European Beekeeping Coordination is an association formed by professionals of the beekeeping sector from different countries of the European Union. Its main activity is the study of the impact on bees of environmental threats such as pesticides or genetically modified organisms (GMOs).BeeLife works for the protection of bees based on the principle that 'bees serve as the canary in the gold mine', sounding the alarm that something is 'wrong in the environment'. Not least, bees create 30% of all our food by pollinating fruits, vegetables and arable crops such as sunflower and oilseed rape, having an inherent value that the Coordination is working to protect.

IMPORTANT: A draft letter is available so that organisations and citizens can sign and send it to their respective ministers before the next SCoPAFF meeting on December 12 and 13. We invite you to download, sign it and send it so we can all call together for the implementation of the Bee Guidance Document in Europe.

LOGO

Name of Minister
Address of ministry

City, Date

Re. Support the full application of EFSA's Bee Guidance Document on 12-13 December

Dear Minister,

We are writing to ask you to support a quick and complete implementation of the European Food Safety Authority's guidance for the assessment of risks posed to bees by pesticides. EU Member States will be asked to vote on this at the upcoming meeting of the Standing Committee on Plant, Animal, Food and Feed (SCoPAFF, phytopharmaceuticals section).

Last spring, we learnt with great relief that the EU, with the support of a majority of Member States [including country xyz – if the case for your country], finally banned all outdoor uses of three pesticides of the neonicotinoid family, namely imidacloprid, clothianidin and thiamethoxam. Our organisations had been calling such a ban for many years.

However, these three pesticides are not alone in posing a risk to bees. Other substances have also been shown to affect bees and to impact their health as a result of acute or chronic exposure. This includes old chemistry, such as deltamethrin, cypermethrin and chlorpyrifos. But it also includes new substances such as, for instance, sulfoxaflor, cyantraniliprole or flupyradifurone, which give rise to major concerns. Worryingly, these substances are now used to replace the banned neonicotinoids.

These other "bee killers" are still allowed for use in the EU because they have not been assessed according to latest scientific knowledge. The 2013 Bee Guidance Document of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) addresses a wide range of potential impacts, including the effects of chronic exposure and effects on larvae. It also covers the risks to wild bees, besides managed honey bees. The Bee Guidance Document reflects best practice in bee risk assessment, since EFSA worked with independent experts and stakeholders to incorporate the latest scientific knowledge.

The EU Pesticide Regulation 1107/2009 requires that pesticides are assessed "in the light of current scientific and technical knowledge". However, this is not currently the case for risks to bees, according to the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA).[1] EFSA therefore published an updated Bee Guidance Document setting more comprehensive testing requirements. After years of discussion, it is high time for the EU to finally apply it.

Citizens are worried by the dramatic decline of pollinators. An ongoing petition already collected 70,000 signatures in favour of a swift implementation of the Bee Guidance Document by the EU[2].

We call on you to support the full application of EFSA's 2013 Bee Guidance Document in all EU pesticide approvals.

Only if all pesticides are tested to the same rigorous standards as the three neonicotinoids that were recently banned, will the EU be able to effectively protect bees from harmful pesticides.

[1] https://efsa.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.2903/j.efsa.2012.2668
[2] https://actions.sumofus.org/pages/save-the-bees-stop-approving-bee-harming-pesticides/

Conversely, a failure to apply these up-to-date standards will render the much celebrated ban on imidacloprid, clothianidin and thiamethoxam meaningless.

We trust that you are as concerned as we are about the multitude of threats that bees and other beneficial insects are facing in Europe. Bees are indispensable for our food production. They pollinate over 80% of food crops, including the healthiest ones such as fruits, vegetables and nuts[3]. Having more bees and more diverse bee species allows farmers to increase their yields and income. The elimination of pesticides that pose a direct risk to their health is a crucial and achievable goal that both [country xyz] and the EU should consistently pursue.

Name

Title and organisation

Signature

[3] Global malnutrition overlaps with pollinator-dependent micronutrient production. Chaplin-Kramer R, Dombeck E, Gerber J, Knuth KA, Mueller ND, Mueller M, Ziv G, Klein AM. Proc Biol Sci. 2014 Nov 7;281(1794):20141799. doi: 10.1098/rspb.2014.1799.