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Europe Restricts 3 Commonly Used Pesticides in Effort to Protect Honeybees

The UK's chief scientific advisor warns that the moratorium could harm the continent's crop production, but environmental groups pronounced the two-year ban a victory

By Richard Van Noorden and Nature News Blog | Monday, April 29, 2013 | 3 comments

No one is sure what is causing bee colonies to die off around the world, but pesticides called neonicotinoids may be part of the problem. Today, Europe's health commissioner Tonio Borg said the European Commission would go ahead with a continent-wide plan to severely restrict three of the most commonly-used pesticides in an effort to protect bee health.

The debate over these pesticides has been fierce. (See 'Europe debates risk to bees', *Nature*, **496**, 408 (2013)). In use since the late 1990s, they are applied to seeds such as maize and soya beans to protect them from insects – but a growing body of research suggests that bees exposed to the pesticides in nectar and pollen might also be harmed. Much of this research has been conducted in laboratories, with pesticide-manufacturers pitted against conservation groups in arguments over the studies' significance in the real world.

In January, the European Food Safety Authority in Parma, Italy, Europe's food-chain risk-assessment body, concluded that three neonicotinoids, clothianidin, imidacloprid and thiamethoxam, should not be used in crops where they might attract bees. The European Commission then proposed two years of restrictions, although not an outright ban: there are some exceptions, such as for crops in greenhouses, or in open-air fields after flowering. European member states in March didn't reach the necessary support for the plans (more voted for than against, but the European system requires a 'qualified majority' – about 74% of votes which are themselves weighted by member state). An appeals committee also reached an impasse today, with 15 member states voting for, 8 against (including the UK), and 4 abstentions. Under European rules, that muddle means the European Commission can choose to go ahead with its proposal. "I pledge to do my utmost to ensure that our bees, which are so vital to our ecosystem and contribute over €22 billion annually to European agriculture, are protected," said Borg: the restrictions would apply from 1 December.

The ban goes against the views of the UK's new chief scientific adviser, Mark Walport, who last week wrote in the *FT* that a "moratorium could be harmful to the continent's crop production, farming communities and consumers".

Environmental groups were delighted with the decision, pronouncing it a victory for the precautionary principle. Some researchers said



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it wasn't clear that a two-year ban would be sufficient to show whether or not the pesticides were harming the bees (particularly if other suspects for colony collapses, such as the parasitic mite *Varroa destructor* and the parasitic fungus *Nosema apis*, are also involved).

But others said the ban didn't go far enough. The UK's Science Media Centre has collected varying reactions from bee scientists: among them, David Goulson, a bee researcher at the University of Sussex, noted that the pesticides would continue to be used on some crops, such as wheat, and called for a wider reduction of pesticide use.

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