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The Bees Are Safe—Now Lift This Pesticide Ban

Brussels banned a class of pesticides to avert a ‘beepocalypse’ that wasn’t happening. Now bugs threaten crops, and farmers may need harsher chemicals.

ENLARGE

A farmer sprays crops next to a field of oilseed rape crop in Warwickshire in central England, May 11, 2005. *PHOTO: REUTERS*

By
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In 2013, to stem what was thought at the time to be a declining honeybee population, the European Union imposed a two-year ban on the use of neonicotinoid insecticides, known as neonics. Unfortunately, the decision was based on faulty science and pressure exerted by environmental lobbyists, and has since caused a widespread deterioration in crops across the U.K. and Europe. Now that the ban is set to expire in November, the EU has a chance to correct its mistake before any more damage is done.

The first and most compelling argument against the ban is, quite simply, that the honeybee population has in fact not been in decline. The EU's own official statistics show the number of honeybee hives rising by 900,000 during the two decades that neonics were on the market. Meanwhile, other wild bee species—those that pollinate crops and thus would come into most extensive contact with neonics—are thriving.

When the EU first imposed the ban, it cited the work of the French scientist Mickaël Henry. Mr. Henry now confesses that he may have overdosed the bees with neonics in his experiments, as many of us suspected at the time, and admits he has "no real clues" how much insecticide bees encounter in the field.

As a result, the European Commission now concedes that the neonics ban "was at no time based on a direct link on bee mortality." Which raises the question: Why were neonics banned at all?

Many of us had vehemently disputed the science used to justify the action. The reality is that the policy was heavily influenced by the environmental nongovernmental organizations whose "bee-pocalypse" hysteria had then reached a fever pitch. Enormous political pressure was exerted on politicians through a "save the bee" campaign. As Britain's secretary of state for environment, food and rural affairs at the time, I received 85,000 emails denouncing me for my opposition to the ban.

That sentiment persists. Just this month, a petition signed by nearly half a million people was delivered to Downing Street asking that the neonics ban be upheld. But the petition, like the policy, appeals more to misinformation than to science.

As a result of the ban, an increase in insect pests has led to crop losses in fields across Britain and Europe. According to the European farming group Copa-Cogeca, EU oilseed-rape production is expected to fall by as much as 7% this year compared to 2014. Worst-hit might be the U.K., where oilseed-rape production reached £684 million ($1.06 billion) in 2014, and some parts of the country are expected to lose as much as 40% of their production this year. In Germany, the predicted loss is 20%. At least five member states have claimed exemptions that would allow farmers to use neonics on an emergency basis.

“If neonics are banned, then we will have to revert back to the much more savage pyrethroid sprays, which have been proven to do so much more harm to bees—and all other insects,” says Viv Marsh, a horticulturalist working on biodiversity conservation in my North Shropshire constituency. “This would be such a retrograde step. It would be all too easy to assume that the fall in numbers of bees is just down to the current use of neonicotinoids in producing the food for us to consume—but it really is not that simple.

“It is more an amalgam of reasons, including the loss of many of the wild flower meadows in this country that had to be ploughed up for us to survive the last world war. Plus pest and disease strike on the honey bee more recently.”

The ban is an indictment of Europe’s “precautionary principle”—Brussels’s trump card for implementing regulations without proof that it is necessary or beneficial. In this case, it was supposed to be an opportunity for the European Commission to examine the facts and determine whether continuing the ban after the initial two-year period was warranted. Now that the facts and the science are in, rarely has a supposed environmental hazard been so completely debunked.

If the Commission does the right thing and allows the two-year ban to expire, it would be a huge relief to farmers trying to save their crops and conservationists trying to save the bees. Just as important, it would be a repudiation of the scare mongering employed by environmentalists and an indication that maybe, at long last, Brussels will start putting facts, science and common sense back into the process of regulatory decision making.

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