The Guardian


# EU agrees total ban on bee-harming pesticides

**The world's most widely used insecticides will be banned from all fields within six months, to protect both wild and honeybees that are vital to crop pollination**

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Fri 27 Apr 2018 10.47 BST

The European Union will ban the world's most widely used insecticides from all fields due to the serious danger they pose to bees.

The ban on neonicotinoids, approved by member nations on Friday, is expected to come into force by the end of 2018 and will mean they can only be used in closed greenhouses.

Bees and other insects are vital for global food production as they pollinate three-quarters of all crops. The plummeting numbers of pollinators in recent years has been blamed, in part, on the widespread use of pesticides. The EU banned the use of neonicotinoids on flowering crops that attract bees, such as oil seed rape, in 2013.

But in February, a major report from the European Union's scientific risk assessors (Efsa) concluded that the high risk to both honeybees and wild bees resulted from any outdoor use,

because the pesticides contaminate soil and water. This leads to the pesticides appearing in wildflowers or succeeding crops. A recent study of honey samples revealed global contamination by neonicotinoids.

Vytenis Andriukaitis, European commissioner for Health and Food Safety, welcomed Friday's vote: "The commission had proposed these measures months ago, on the basis of the scientific advice from Efsa. Bee health remains of paramount importance for me since it concerns biodiversity, food production and the environment."

The ban on the three main neonicotinoids has widespread public support, with almost 5 million people signing a petition from campaign group Avaaz. "Banning these toxic pesticides is a beacon of hope for bees," said Antonia Staats at Avaaz. "Finally, our governments are listening to their citizens, the scientific evidence and farmers who know that bees can't live with these chemicals and we can't live without bees."

Martin Dermine, at Pesticide Action Network Europe, said: "Authorising neonicotinoids a quarter of a century ago was a mistake and led to an environmental disaster. Today's vote is historic."

However, the pesticide manufacturers and some farming groups have accused the EU of being overly cautious and suggested crop yields could fall, a claim rejected by others. "European agriculture will suffer as a result of this decision," said Graeme Taylor, at the European Crop Protection Association. "Perhaps not today, perhaps not tomorrow, but in time decision makers will see the clear impact of removing a vital tool for farmers."

The UK's National Farmers' Union (NFU) said the ban was regrettable and not justified by the evidence. Guy Smith, NFU deputy president, said: "The pest problems that neonicotinoids helped farmers tackle have not gone away. There is a real risk that these restrictions will do nothing measurable to improve bee health, while compromising the effectiveness of crop protection."

A spokesman for the UK Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs welcomed the ban, but added: "We recognise the impact a ban will have on farmers and will continue to work with them to explore alternative approaches." In November, UK environment secretary Michael Gove overturned the UK's previous opposition to a full outdoor ban.

Neonicotinoids, which are nerve agents, have been shown to cause a wide range of harm to individual bees, such as damaging memory and reducing queen numbers.

But this evidence has strengthened recently to show damage to colonies of bees. Other research has also revealed that 75% of all flying insects have disappeared in Germany and probably much further afield, prompting warnings of "ecological armageddon".

Prof Dave Goulson, at the University of Sussex, said the EU ban was logical given the weight of evidence but that disease and lack of flowery habitats were also harming bees. "Also, if these neonicotinoids are simply replaced by other similar compounds, then we will simply be going round in circles. What is needed is a move towards truly sustainable farming," he said.

Some experts are worried that the exemption for greenhouses means neonicotinoids will be washed out into water courses, where they can severely harm aquatic life.

Prof Jeroen van der Sluijs, at the University of Bergen, Norway, said neonicotinoids will also continue to be used in flea treatments for pets and in stables and animal transport vehicles, which

account for about a third of all uses: “Environmental pollution will continue.”

The EU decision could have global ramifications, according to Prof Nigel Raine, at the University of Guelph in Canada: “Policy makers in other jurisdictions will be paying close attention to these decisions. We rely on both farmers and pollinators for the food we eat. Pesticide regulation is a balancing act between unintended consequences of their use for non-target organisms, including pollinators, and giving farmers the tools they need to control crop pests.”



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- Pesticides
- Bees
- Farming
- Insects
- Europe
- Wildlife
- news