

MPs urge Government to accept neonicotinoid ban

28 July 2014 | By [Alistair Driver](#)

MPS have urged the Government to accept the current EU suspension of neonicotinoid seed treatments, arguing that the Government is wrong to use economic arguments to back its stance.

The Environmental Audit Committee (EAC) insists the [2013 decision to ban three neonicotinoid pesticides](#) in flowering crops like oilseed rape (OSR) was 'the right approach given the requirements of the precautionary principle'.



The [Government has opposed the ban from the start](#) and, according to the EAC, continues to interpret the precautionary principle as encompassing economic as well as environmental considerations.

Defra has argued that there is a lack of evidence that neonicotinoids are harmful to bees and other pollinators at the levels used in crops. It has echoed industry arguments that removing these key products could have a detrimental impact on crop yields, particularly OSR, and knock-on economic effects.

In a [report published on Monday on Defra's National Pollinator Strategy](#), EAC says it does not agree with the Government's use of economic argument to justify its position.

Neonicotinoid suspension

- Three neonicotinoid pesticides, clothianidin, imidacloprid and thiametoxam, are currently suspended for use in flowering crops.
- The ban came into effect in December 2013 and is due to be reviewed in 2015.
- The products were suspended following a risk assessment by the European Food Safety Authority covering their potential impact on bee health and numbers.

"However, if the Government insists on doing so, it should follow its own argument by being able to clearly demonstrate not just the impact of neonicotinoids on pollinators, but also the benefits or otherwise of using them on crop yields and the possible cost of reduced pollination services," EAC chair, Joan Walley, said.

Draw a line

"Defra should use the final National Pollinator Strategy to draw a line under the European neonicotinoid ban. It should make clear that it now accepts the ban and will not seek to overturn it when the European Commission conducts a review next year."

She called for the Government to clarify its position in the wake of [Syngenta's recent application for emergency use of neonicotinoid pesticides in OSR this autumn](#).

"The application has been withdrawn, but the Government should make clear that it would have turned it down in any case, and that no such applications will be accepted in future," Ms Walley said.

Why Defra says economics matter under the precautionary principle

In its response to the committee's previous report on the subject, Defra argued that economic issues are relevant when the precautionary principle is invoked.

"Economic factors are relevant because the precautionary principle requires that before a decision is taken, the available evidence is to be used to carry out the best possible assessment of the risks and the options for action," it said.

“Extreme cases illustrate the point that action should be informed by consideration of the knock-on consequences.

“It would evidently be right to tackle even a remote risk of serious environmental damage if this action carried no cost.

“It would not be right to tackle the same remote risk if the action needed would cripple the economy.”

National Pollinator Strategy

The committee welcomed the Government’s draft National Pollinator Strategy, which was published in March and aims to safeguard pollinators, but said it was too weak. The final version will be published later this autumn, followed by a detailed delivery plan six months later.



The neonicotinoid suspension covers flowering crops because of the supposed risk to pollinators

The strategy incorporates a programme of research to address the ‘patchy’ evidence picture on what affects pollinator numbers.

However the MPs warned that Defra was too reliant on research funded by the pesticide manufacturers.

“When it comes to research on pesticides, Defra is content to let the manufacturers fund the work,” Ms Walley said.

“This testifies to a loss of environmental protection capacity in the Department responsible for it. If the research is to command public confidence, independent controls need to be maintained at every step. Unlike other research funded by pesticide companies, these studies also need to be peer-reviewed and published in full.”

CAP reform

In its previous report on the subject, the [Pollinator and Pesticides report](#), the Committee recommended that the Government use CAP reform to introduce incentives for pollinator-friendly actions.

But Ms Walley said: “The way Defra has chosen to implement environmental schemes under the CAP does not put the focus on pollinators. These need to be looked at again.

“The Government should ensure that pollinators are the focus of the upcoming European Commission review of the CAP measures.”

A Defra spokesperson said: “Bees and other pollinators are vital for our environment.

“This report recognises we are doing more than ever before to protect them, not least encouraging people to take simple steps such as growing more pollen rich flowers.

“As we draw up our National Pollinators Strategy for publication later in the year, we will look at this report with interest. This Government is determined to do all that it can to help bees and pollinators flourish.”

Reaction

Nick von Westenholz, chief executive of the Crop Protection Association said the association was 'disappointed' with the committee's recommendation that the government should now accept the European Commission's moratorium on three neonicotinoid insecticides.

"The government's own expert technical agency, the Chemicals Regulation Directorate, has recently stated that there is no further evidence that changes the government's position that neonicotinoids are safe for use in the environment.

"Independent Experts have continually advised government on the safety of neonicotinoid pesticides which are a key tool in UK food production.

"It is vital that any decisions government takes regarding pesticides are based on sound science and the expert technical advice of the regulator rather than emotive public campaigns.

"Pesticides are but one of a range of multiple factors, including habitat loss, disease and climate change, that may put adverse pressure on pollinators."

NFU vice president Guy Smith said the union 'strongly disagreed' with the committee's call for a precautionary, hazard-based approach to pesticide use to help protect bees.

He stressed that farmers above all were concerned with and understood the need to protect bees, whose pollination activity is worth £510 million to agriculture and horticulture.

He said: "Farmers need crop protection materials to grow crops and if they stop growing pollen rich crops such as oilseed rape then bees will be one of the main losers.

"The NFU believes that the National Pollinator Strategy needs to continue to focus on evidence-based actions that will deliver real benefits for bees, particularly to provide more of the food and habitat they need and not be drawn into promoting ineffective approaches, regardless of their apparent popularity.

"It is not the role of the National Pollinator Strategy to deliver a precautionary hazard-based approach to pesticide use."

The **Soil Association's policy director Peter Melchett** 'warmly welcomed' the report.

"We agree that the Government should draw a line under the ban on neonicotinoids and instead ensure that 'lower and no pesticide farming systems are supported through the National Pollinator Strategy'.

"Scientific research proves that organic farming has huge benefits for pollinators. A recent meta-analysis from Oxford University found on average that organic farms have 48 per cent more species of pollinators than non-organic farms."

Friends of the Earth nature campaigner Sandra Bell, who gave evidence to the MPs' inquiry, also welcomed the report.

"If the Government's action plan to protect Britain's pollinators is to have any credibility it must back the ban on bee-harming insecticides and set out a clear strategy to reduce pesticide use," she said.

"Thousands of people across the UK are already taking action to help our crucial bee populations - the Government must act too."