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Pesticides: Tough negotiations ahead as MEPs back bans

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The European Parliament's environment committee approved a ban on pesticides that are toxic to human health, setting the stage for a showdown with EU member states which favour a more lenient approach.

Background:

Amid growing public concern over the impact of pesticides, the Commission presented in July 2006 a 'pesticides package' aimed at protecting human health and the environment from their dangerous or excessive use in agriculture. The package includes a new [Regulation](#) to tighten pesticide usage and authorisation rules in Europe and a [Framework Directive](#) laying down common objectives and requirements for sustainable use of pesticides.

The proposed regulation for new approval process has proven particularly controversial on two points ([EurActiv 16/102008](#) and [10/10/2008](#)):

- **Cut-off criteria** for substances used in the production of pesticides (a market ban on substances that pose potentially severe risks to human health and the environment), and;
- **mutual recognition** of authorised products within specified geographical zones.

Adopting their position on Wednesday (5 November), MEPs were also mindful to introduce sweeteners for the negotiations to take place ahead of a second reading on the pesticides 'package' in January next year.

This mainly includes the possibility for member states to reject pesticides authorisation granted by other EU countries and allow the continued usage of toxic substances when they are proven essential for crop survival.

Voting on a report on the sustainable use of pesticides, MEPs introduced a compromise amendment stating that **national action plans for reducing the volume of pesticides used should include quantitative targets**. A minimum 50% reduction target is proposed for "active substances of very high concern" and those classified as "toxic or very toxic".

The compromise was agreed between the Green and Socialist groups with a comfortable majority, paving the way for difficult negotiations between the Parliament and the Council. The French Presidency said it was still hoping for a second reading agreement.

The committee's report on the authorisation process restates MEPs' support for hazard-based criteria for deciding approval of the most dangerous substance and recommends **additional cut-off criteria** for immunotoxic and neurotoxic substances, if the risk is proven significant for at least one in a million citizens. Four-year authorisations of hazardous substances would however still be allowed, in case bans pose serious risks to plant health.

The report also:

- **Rejects the idea of zonal mutual recognition of products**. Instead, it asks for more harmonisation for products authorisation and allowing each member state to decide, within 180 days, whether it wants to authorise a substance on its territory.
- **Asks for better protection of bees**. Pesticides producers would need to prove that a substance does not present acute or chronic risk to bees before a product is authorised.
- Proposes the establishment of an "electronic field pass" which would oblige farmers to inform retailers of the pesticides they use.

While both the environment committee and the Council support a ban on the most dangerous substances, the committee's recommendation on the authorisation process differs greatly from the [common position](#) reached by the Council on the zonal mutual recognition of products.

The Council backs the establishment of three geographical zones (North, Centre, South) where agricultural, plant health, environmental and climatic conditions are comparable, inside which mutual recognition of products should take place. It would allow for exceptional five-year authorisations of hazardous substances in case bans pose serious risk to crop survival.

Positions:

Ahead of the vote, **Dimitri Giotakos**, a member of the cabinet of Environment Commissioner Stavros Dimas, said the views of the co-legislators, the Council and the Parliament, differed because the environment committee felt "more emotional" about the dossier while the Council discussed it from an agricultural perspective. The **Commission** is however confident that a constructive second reading agreement will be found, he said.

A **Spanish MEP Pilar Ayuso (EPP-ED)** deplored the "lack a common vision" on the issue in the Parliament as northern and southern member states look at pesticides from a completely different perspective. "Northern countries can't understand how these amendments will affect southern countries," to whom pesticides are much more important, she said.

German Green MEP Hiltrud Breyer, rapporteur on the authorisation dossier, said the environment committee had "set a strong negotiating position for upcoming discussions with the Council and the European Commission by strengthening the cut-off criteria". She welcomed backing for additional bans for substances deemed to be of significant risk to the development of the immune or nervous systems and hailed the rejection of zonal authorisation for pesticide products. "As rapporteur, I support harmonised rules for product authorisation but this must not be at the expense of EU member states," she said.

Christa Kläß MEP (EPP-ED), rapporteur on the sustainable use of pesticides, said the use of plant protection products had to be based on the "precautionary principle and the knowledge of the effects". They should be "the guideline of the EU-wide use of the products".

The **European Crop Protection Association (ECPA)** stated that while some of the more extreme cut-off criteria proposed by the Parliament were "strategically dropped to ease the passing of the regulation, the remaining criteria are still ideologically driven and have no scientific or practical basis".

It restated that additional cut-off criteria would lead to "an unnecessary ban on a number of products which have been shown to meet high safety standards and are currently being used safely by European farmers". It also deplored that the three-zone authorisation concept was removed and "exemptions were introduced which would allow member states to easily reject a pesticide authorisation granted by other member states".

In addition, it argues that amendments adopted for the Sustainable Use Directive would fix "arbitrary use reduction targets" which had already failed in the past. "Pesticide use responds to real, local pest management needs, not to targets. Hence, the way forward is through improving practices," said ECPA Director general **Friedhelm Schmider**.

The **Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL)** and **Pesticide Action Network Europe (PAN Europe)** deplored that "the Committee backed away from previous commitments to eliminate hazardous pesticides from use in food produce" instead agreeing "a substantially diluted set of proposals". They argued that "a complex set of loopholes and derogations now added to the text could bring substantial delays in replacing the worst pesticides".

Such derogations include the inclusion of immunotoxic and neurotoxic substances to the cut off criteria only if the risk is proven significant to one in a million citizens, "which is very difficult to assess," said HEAL Deputy Director Monica Guarinoni. The committee also "diluted" the Parliament's first reading agreement ban to use pesticides in and around public places (schools, parks, etc.) to a ban in public places alone and not around them, she explained.

Conservative MEP Robert Sturdy says the legislation "threatens already hard-pressed consumers who are now even more likely to see their monthly food bill go up". "With the current worries over food prices and food security, it seems absurd that MEPs are voting on these proposals without the benefit of an impact assessment to make a more informed decision," he continued.

Next steps:

- **13 Jan. 2009:** Parliament's second reading on the 'pesticides package' scheduled.
- **Mid-2010:** The legislation could enter into force.

Links

European Union

- PreLex: [Proposal for a regulation concerning the placing of plant protection products on the market](#) (2006) [FR] [DE]
- PreLex: [Proposal for establishing a framework for Community action to achieve a sustainable use of pesticides](#) (2006) [FR] [DE]
- European Parliament news: [Safety first for pesticides](#) (5 November 2008)

Political Groups

- Group of the Greens / European Free Alliance in the European Parliament: [Environment committee supports better protection against dangerous pesticides](#) (5 November 2008) [DE]
- Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats) and European Democrats in the European Parliament: [Plant Protection Directive: EP Environment Committee improves safety aspects](#) (5 November 2008) [DE]
- Conservatives in the European Parliament: [Pesticide ban will push food prices up even further](#) (5 November 2008)

Business & Industry

- European Crop Protection Association (ECPA): [ECPA Calls On European Parliament to Replace Ideology with Science](#) (5 November 2008)
- Copa-Cogeca press release: [Pesticides: consumers entitled to nothing but the truth](#) (4 November 2008)
- European Crop Protection Association (ECPA): [United opposition to EU pesticides ban a first](#) (4 November 2008)

NGOs

- Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL) and Pesticide Action Network Europe (PAN Europe): [Parliament reaches compromise on health and environment](#) (5 November 2008)