Europe Takes Steps To Suspend Bee-Toxic Pesticides

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For immediate release
February 1, 2013

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The European Commission announced yesterday its position against the use of neonicotinoid insecticides, pushing nations within the European Union (EU) to impose a two-year suspension on their use. The proposal, put forward at a meeting of the Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health, would restrict the application of neonicotinoids as granules, seed-treatment or spray, on crops that are attractive to bees, particularly, sunflowers, rapeseed, corn, cotton, and cereal crops. Beekeepers and environmental groups say that this decision should signal the way forward for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to suspend neonicotinoids in the U.S.

“It’s a great thing,” said New York commercial beekeeper Jim Doan, “I’m hoping that the EPA follows in their footsteps. While I recognize our government works differently, it says something that the European government has recognized the overwhelming data on the impact of these pesticides.”

The announcement comes on the heels of research conducted by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) which indicated that three neonicotinoid insecticides—imidacloprid, clothianidin, and thiamethoxam, produced by Switzerland’s Syngenta and Germany’s Bayer—pose an unacceptable hazards to honey bees.

In its report released January 16th, EFSA concludes that systemic contamination of neonicotinoid-treated crops, neonicotinoid dust exposure, and contaminated nectar and pollen contributes to declines in honey bees and weakens their hives. High risks were also identified from exposure to guttation fluid from corn for thiamethoxam.

“Independent science increasingly points to pesticides, especially neonicotinoids, as a critical factor in honey bee declines. Europe’s action, based on this growing body of research, should spur EPA to impose new restrictions on these pesticides,” said Paul Towers, a spokesperson for Pesticide Action Network North America.

In light of these findings, the EU Commission is urging member states to suspend neonicotinoid treatment on crops that are considered attractive to bees, i.e. flowering crops. Commission health spokesman Frederic Vincent indicated that, "We hope the regulation can be adopted before March," and at the latest by July 1, 2013.

"Our declining U.S. honey bees, bumblebees and other pollinators, and of course our struggling beekeepers nationwide, need at least the same protections from the far-too-deadly neonicotinoids as their European counterparts are getting," said Peter Jenkins, attorney at the Center for Food Safety.

Center for Food Safety, Beyond Pesticides, Pesticide Action Network North America, and over twenty-five beekeepers, filed an emergency legal petition in 2012 with the EPA seeking an immediate halt to the use of clothianidin until adequate studies have been completed and safeguards put in place. The agency denied the petition and is considering other less immediate action.

Source URL: http://www.panna.org/press-release/europe-takes-steps-suspend-bee-toxic-pesticides