

In a bid to save bees, Europe bans some pesticides

Bernhard Warner



Photograph by Sean Gallup/Getty Images
Bees congregate on a honeycomb in the colony of beekeeper Reiner Gabriel in the garden of his home in Blankenfelde, Germany

Europe's beekeepers scored an improbable victory over agrochemical companies today when the European Commission announced this morning it will enforce a partial ban on a trio of commonly used pesticides suspected of killing off honeybees in huge numbers. The restrictions, which could go into effect as soon as Dec. 1, would be the largest ever on a class of pesticides widely used by farmers and gardeners.

The measure came out of EU-funded research to find the cause of honeybee die-offs that have been decimating colonies across Europe over the past decade. North America, too, has not been spared, creating a massive threat to the global food supply. Honeybees pollinate \$201 billion worth of crops annually, according to the United Nations. Still, Europe's decision to finger pesticides as a potential culprit generated massive debate, dividing member nations, and putting the ban in doubt just a month ago.

In an EU vote this morning, however, 15 member states voted to ban the chemicals' use on all plants and crops attractive to the bees, eight voted against, and four abstained. Following the vote, the Commission vowed to hammer out the full details of the new EU-wide restriction on the use of "neonictinoid" pesticides in coming weeks. It is expected the chemicals, identified as clothianidin, imidacloprid, and thiametoxam, would be limited to greenhouse use and late-season crop spraying.

The "neonictinoid" chemicals are used in pesticides made by Bayer CropScience (BAYN) and by Syngenta (SYT). Following the vote, Bayer warned that a partial ban could reduce crop yields across Europe and put farmers out of work. "Bayer CropScience predicts a negative impact on farmers, R&D driven ag companies, the seed industry and the food value chain," the company said in a statement, adding "there is no evidence that a suspension will have any positive impact on bee health." Bayer called on the Commission to put off the ban until a "proper impact assessment" has been completed. Syngenta, which has worked closely with

Bayer in recent months to get the proposal defeated, did not return calls by press time. Combined, the two companies sell globally nearly \$2 billion each year worth of agricultural products that contain these chemicals.

While the Commission doesn't break out how member states vote, those following the proceedings closely say the decisive vote came from Germany, which previously opposed the ban. Germany switched sides in recent days when it realized public support to do something for the bees was rising while member nation opposition was evaporating, according to Walter Haefeker, president of the European Professional Beekeepers Association. "For Ms. Merkel, it's not very popular in an election year to be found on the side of the chemical industry rather than the bees," he said, referring to German Chancellor Angela Merkel's reelection bid this autumn.

Haefeker believes today's vote will affect agriculture policy beyond Europe. "I think industry is right to be very concerned [about] a spillover effect [in] the U.S. and Canada," he says. It's true though that Europe is traditionally harder on the agribusiness sector than its trading partners, as evidenced by its restrictions on genetically modified crops, considered the toughest anywhere in the world. With pesticides, its cautious stance has yet to persuade its counterparts across the Atlantic to follow suit. Case in point: The EPA says it isn't prepared to weigh in on a neonicotinoid link to bee deaths until 2018 at the earliest, when its own research is concluded.

Fonte: Bloomberg Businessweek. Disponível em:
<<http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2013-04-29/in-a-bid-to-save-bees-europe-bans-some-pesticides#r=hp-ls>>. Acesso em: 29 Abr. 2013.

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