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From Lord de Mauley  
Parliamentary Under Secretary

Dear [REDACTED]

Thank you for your letter of 24 January to the Secretary of State, about Bees and neonicotinoid pesticides. I am replying as the Minister responsible for pesticides, and I apologise for the delay in doing so.

Pollinators, including bees, are essential to the health of our natural environment and to the prosperity of our farming industry. Defra attaches great importance to healthy bee populations – including managed honey bees, bumble bees and solitary bees. At a purely pragmatic level, pollination is worth several hundred million pounds per year. For Defra, bees are among our greatest allies in delivering our twin priorities of animal and plant health.

The Government takes any threat to bees very seriously and we have approached the issue of neonicotinoids in this light, making it clear that we are prepared to take action if the evidence indicates a need. In deciding what action may be needed to protect bees, the correct process is first to collect the evidence and make the best possible assessment of the risks posed by neonicotinoids. Then it is possible to decide a proportionate response. This includes checking for unintended consequences (such as farmers switching from neonicotinoids to alternative products with their own impacts on bees or the wider environment).

Laboratory studies show that bees may be significantly affected by neonicotinoids. However, field data on honey bees indicates that the level of exposure in real life does not lead to these harmful effects. There has been an absence of field data on other bee species and Defra therefore commissioned field trials on bumble bees, which will produce final results within the next few weeks.

Pesticides, such as neonicotinoids, can only be sold or used if approved. This is a two stage process, with active substances being approved at EU level and products containing approved active substances being authorised by Member States. Approvals are only granted if assessment of scientific data shows that risks are acceptably low. Approvals are regularly reviewed to ensure they continue to meet current standards. Earlier review is possible if concerns arise and can lead to withdrawal of product authorisations.



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As you know the independent Advisory Committee on Pesticides has considered the evidence on several occasions. The Committee advised, following its latest meeting on 29 January, that there were grounds for a review of neonicotinoid authorisations under pesticides legislation. They also advised that a decision on regulatory action should not be taken in advance of the final outputs of the current research, which should be completed urgently. I have accepted the Committee's advice and officials are taking this work forward.

I agree that Neonicotinoids are important insecticides. Their use as seed treatments allows effective control of crops at the earliest stage of crop development and they control pests that are increasingly becoming resistant to other products. Although there are uncertainties, Defra's assessment suggests that it is highly probable that restrictions on neonicotinoids would carry significant costs for agriculture.

As in the UK, consideration of this issue in Europe has been running for some months. Considerable efforts have been put into designing an updated risk assessment process for the effects of pesticides on bees and UK experts have contributed to this work. On the instructions of the Commission, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) carried out an assessment of the existing data on the three main neonicotinoids with the emerging new requirements. They published Conclusions in January which indicated, unsurprisingly, that the old data did not fully address the new requirements.

The Commission has drawn up plans for a ban on the use of three neonicotinoids on crops "attractive to bees" (a long list including oilseed rape and maize) and on spring cereals. This includes a ban on the sale and use of all seeds for those crops treated with the three active substances and a review after two years.

The UK has not ruled out action. However, we have urged the Commission to make a proportionate response to the scientific evidence. We have called on them to complete the scientific assessment, taking account of our new research, and to assess the impacts of action so that the measures taken are proportionate to the risks identified.

Regrettably, the Commission have not listened to our views and those of many other Governments. Their proposal was put to a vote in the Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health on 15 March. The UK abstained in this vote. In total 14 Member States either abstained or voted against the Commission.

As many Member States did not support the Commission, its proposal was not adopted. However, it is expected that it will go to an Appeal Committee where the proposal will pass unless a Qualified Majority of Member States vote against.

Our next steps will be to continue to work on this issue. In particular, we will complete the field studies that we have in hand and this will provide further much needed scientific information on field effects of neonicotinoids. In Europe, we will continue to press the Commission to complete an assessment of the science and the impacts of action and to draw up proportionate proposals.

We will also continue with our wider work to protect bees. It is very clear that bees face many problems that are unrelated to neonicotinoids and it would be entirely wrong to lose sight of these issues. We are looking across all our activities on bees to see whether there are areas where more work is needed and whether there may be added value in bringing together a holistic strategy or action plan for pollinators. I will be meeting Friends of the Earth on Tuesday to discuss this issue.



It is the importance of bees and other pollinators that underpins our work in this area. In addressing the problems facing our bees and pollinators it is vital to understand them, take all the evidence into account and make a considered response. Hasty action is very likely to be ineffective or to have unforeseen consequences. We will continue to look at bee health in the round and will take whatever action is appropriate to safeguard these valuable creatures.

de Manley