

MEETING WITH FRIENDS OF THE EARTH: 19 MARCH 2013

BRIEFING ON NEONICOTINOIDS AND BEES

Key points to make

- Neonicotinoids are not the main issue facing bees and I do not want to make them the main topic for this afternoon's meeting. I want to concentrate on the wider issues around bee and pollinator health.
- The Government takes any threat to bees very seriously and we have approached the issue of neonicotinoids in this light. We have always made 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).
- Accordingly, the UK has assessed all the evidence and has generated its own data where there are important knowledge gaps. We are approaching the end of this process and have launched a formal review of authorisations on the advice of the independent Advisory Committee on Pesticides.
- In Friday's vote in the Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health, the UK abstained. We do not consider that the Commission's proposal is well thought through. We have urged the Commission 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.

Q and A

Q. Why haven't you backed the Commission's proposal?

A. We are not against action if the evidence demonstrates the need. However, the Commission have acted hastily. They have not completed the scientific assessment, instead acting on a comparison between existing data and a draft risk assessment process which has not been completed or agreed. Having not made an effective judgement of risk, they have then proposed control measures without considering whether they are necessary to tackle any risk.

We are not alone in that view. The majority of member States did not support the Commission proposal.

Q. What is your own assessment of the risks from neonicotinoids?

A. We are completing that assessment. There are clearly demonstrated sub-lethal effects but the important question is whether the exposure of bees to neonicotinoids in the field is at levels that may cause these effects. Field studies on honey bees suggest not, but data on other species has been lacking. For this reason we have carried out a field study on bumble bees and the final results of this will be available very soon.

Q. What does your field study on bumble bees show?

A. Bumble bee colonies at each of three sites had varying exposure to neonicotinoids. Colonies at all three sites survived, grew and produced queens. Colonies at one site – in fact the one with lowest exposure to neonicotinoids – had a significantly lower growth rate. We are carrying out further statistical analysis to investigate this and other aspects more fully.