

Proposal to Protect Bees Stirs Hornets' Nest

DON MELVIN, Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — An attempt to protect Europe's bee population has kicked up a hornets' nest.

On Thursday, the EU's commissioner for health and consumer policy, Tonio Borg, proposed to restrict the use of three pesticides — called neonicotinoids — to crops to which bees are not attracted.

The three pesticides were clothianidin, imidacloprid and thiametoxam; the crops from which they would be banned include sunflowers, rapeseed, cotton and maize. The policy would take effect July 1 for the EU's 27 nations and be reviewed after two years.

But while environmentalists welcomed Borg's proposal as an important first step, Borg's spokesman, Frederic Vincent, confirmed that some countries reacted unenthusiastically, preferring further study to immediate action. He declined to identify them.

Marco Contiero of the environmental group Greenpeace said Britain was firmly opposed, and Germany and Spain were either opposed or wanted more time to consider.

Luis Morago of the advocacy group Avaaz, meanwhile, condemned what he called "spurious" British and German opposition and said 2.2 million people had signed an Internet petition calling for a comprehensive ban on the pesticides.

Beekeepers have reported an unusual decline in bees over the past decade, particularly in Western Europe, the European Food Safety Authority says. Bees are critically important to the environment, sustaining biodiversity by providing pollination for a wide range of crops and wild plants — including most of the food crops in Europe, it says.

"This is the first time that the EU has recognized that the demise of bees has a perpetrator: pesticides," Morago said. "The two-year suspension on pesticides could mark a tipping point in the battle to stop the chemical Armageddon for bees, but it does not go far enough."

Matthias Wuethrich of Greenpeace agreed that more needed to be done to save the bees.

"A ban on a few hazardous pesticides is only a very limited safeguard," Wuethrich said. "The disappearance of bees is just a symptom of a failed agricultural system based on the intensive use of chemicals, serving the interest of powerful corporations like Bayer and Syngenta."

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He said the solution was a "paradigm shift to sustainable agriculture and modern eco-farming practices."

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