The RSPB's views on pesticides

The RSPB recognises that pesticides can be useful to farmers and other land managers. Farmers need to manage pests so they can provide plentiful, high quality and affordable food. Pesticides can be an effective tool to help them do this.

However, because pesticides can have damaging effects on other wildlife, water quality and human health, we believe that they should only be used as a last resort. The RSPB is a strong supporter of more sustainable, wildlife-friendly farming methods and we work with government and industry to reduce unintentional damage from pesticides.

We do this through research, by demonstrating best practice on our own land, through advice to farmers and by influencing Government policy.

What does the RSPB think about neonicotinoids?

Neonicotinoids are a modern class of pesticides, developed with the intention of causing less harm to wildlife and lower risks to humans than earlier alternatives. However, there is a growing body of evidence that suggests that neonicotinoids may have unforeseen consequences for some insects, especially bees. Neonicotinoids have certainly been shown to cause behavioural changes and death to insects in laboratory and field conditions, even at very low doses.

The RSPB is extremely concerned by this emerging evidence and believes urgent action is needed from government, the agricultural industry and the research community. We also believe that action on neonicotinoids must be accompanied by a wider plan to reduce pesticide use. Nature-friendly farmers across the UK protect and encourage beneficial insects because they realise just how important these species are for our future food production capacity. We need to produce food today in ways that doesn't compromise our ability to produce food in the future, and that means protecting pollinators and other farmland wildlife.

What's our position on the new EU measures to restrict neonicotinoid use?

In May 2013, the European Commission announced restrictions on three of the major neonicotinoids. Under the new rules, these chemicals can only be used on crops that do not attract pollinating insects, and may only be used by professionals (so, for example, gardening products sold to the public will no longer be allowed to contain these chemicals). These restrictions will apply in all EU member states and will be reviewed after 2 years.

We strongly welcome this decision by the European Commission as an important first step towards safeguarding pollinators. It is now vital that the next two years are used to improve our understanding of the risks of neonicotinoids to pollinators and to the wider environment. Research and monitoring must be intensified to fill in the gaps in our knowledge.

The RSPB recognises that the restrictions will pose real challenges for some farmers. These farmers should be given support and advice to adopt methods of managing pests successfully without using neonicotinoids, in ways that are safe for wildlife and the environment.

Pesticides are only one of the challenges facing bees and other pollinating insects. To halt declines in pollinator populations these challenges must be tackled in a coherent way. The RSPB supports calls for a National Bee Action Plan.

The RSPB is calling for:

- Increased funding for wildlife-friendly farming and more research into the full impacts of farming techniques on our wildlife populations.
- Government and industry to work together to reduce agriculture's reliance on pesticides and promote farming practices that do not cause loss of biodiversity. This should include specific advice to farmers on how to manage the transition away from neonicotinoids as the two-year restrictions come into force.
- Chemical companies, government scientists and independent researchers to work together to identify and resolve the key points of disagreement around the impacts of neonicotinoids on pollinators. This will require greater transparency and sharing of information.
- Urgent research to address other emerging concerns around neonicotinoids, including persistence in soil, impacts on aquatic wildlife and effects on birds.
- A high priority to be placed on developing and promoting safe alternatives, both chemical and non-chemical, to neonicotinoids, especially when used on flowering crops.
- The impacts of the ban on farming and wildlife (including the impacts of pesticides which may be used instead of neonicotinoids) to be closely monitored to inform the European Commission's decision on the ongoing status of these chemicals.
- The EU and the UK Government to review their policies on neonicotinoids regularly as new evidence comes to light. If 2 years proves to be too short a time to reach an informed decision about whether neonicotinoids are safe, the restrictions must be extended for a longer period.
- Government to review rules on labelling of pesticides, requiring products containing neonicotinoids that remain on the market to be clearly labelled as such.

The RSPB pledges to:

- Continue to monitor the emerging science. The RSPB's Head of Conservation Science is already playing an active role reviewing the evidence concerning the impacts of these insecticides.
- Keep RSPB's policy position on neonicotinoids under review. The RSPB is, at this point, supporting a ban specifically on neonicotinoid use on crops that are attractive to pollinators. We will extend our call for a ban to other crops if new scientific evidence requires it.
- Continue to work with government and the industry to reduce unintentional damage from pesticides. We will do this through research, by demonstrating best practice on our own land, through advice to farmers and by working to influence Government policy.
- Eliminate use of neonicotinoids on our own land. In exceptional circumstances derogations may be granted, for example if we decided to carry out research on the impacts of neonicotinoids on wildlife.
- Raise awareness of the concerns around neonicotinoids and other pesticides among our members and supporters, particularly through our advice on wildlife-friendly gardening.