

Scientists Aim to Ban Neonicotinoid Pesticides

<http://www.volkskrant.nl/wetenschap/wetenschappers-willen-bestrijdingsmiddel-met-neonicotinoiden-verbieden~a3816478/>

With a coordinated campaign, a small group of scientists tried to ban the use of neonicotinoid pesticides said to increase bee mortality.

By: Hidde Boersma 23 December 2014, 02:00 AM

With an organised campaign, a group of scientists tried to enforce a ban on neonicotinoids, a popular class of pesticides that have been linked to the increased mortality of bees and other insects since the beginning of this century.

This is evidenced in a leaked document reporting on two meetings of the scientists in 2010. The document shows that those researchers are more activists than scientists, according to David Zaruk, a Brussels risk analyst specialised in environmental issues. He discovered the document on the website of one of the parties involved.

Strategy

‘By basing their ideas on the assumption that neonicotinoids are culpable for the decline of nature, they are corrupting the normal scientific method. To the group, it was a foregone conclusion; then they just looked for evidence to support it. What’s more, by calling for a ban they are acting in the political sphere.’

The document describes a four-year strategy for forcing a ban on the pesticides. At the first meeting, which took place on 14 June 2010 in Switzerland, there were four scientists present, including Maarten Bijleveld van Lexmond, founder of the Netherlands branch of the Worldwide Fund for Nature, and Piet Wit, chairman of the Commission on Ecosystem Management of the IUCN, the largest environmental organization in the world, best known for creating the Red List of Threatened Species.

The document states that the four scientists’ plan was to ‘show as convincingly as possible the effect of neonicotinoids on insects, birds, and other animals, and on the functioning of ecosystems and human life,’ and to describe this in multiple publications in leading scientific journals. By presenting the publications simultaneously, they hope to make as great an impact as possible. What’s more, the publications are to be accompanied by a policy article that ‘calls for a moratorium on the use and sale of neonicotinoids’. After publication, a ‘campaign can be set up immediately by the Worldwide Fund for Nature, which would more quickly prevent politicians from being able to avoid banning them.

A fight to the finish

As a vehicle for their campaign, the four proposed setting up a ‘Task Force on Systemic Pesticides’, which will act as an advisory body of the IUCN. One of the coordinators of the task force is Jeroen van der Sluijs, former senior university lecturer for new and emerging risks at the University of Utrecht and

now affiliated with the University of Bergen in Norway. Together with eleven other European scientists, he attended the second meeting from 28 to 30 June 2010 in Paris, where the content of the articles was discussed.

According to van der Sluijs, there was no campaign, the task force was completely independent, and the final analysis is separate from the agreements the four made in the first meeting. He said that the IUCN used the IPCC climate panel as a model and does not intend to prescribe policy.

Toxicologist Henk Tennekes, who also attended the second meeting, sees it differently. The document is found on his website. 'As a citizen I felt obliged to do something. If we do not ban neonicotinoids, we will be on the threshold of an ecological catastrophe. Entire ecosystems will collapse due to insects going extinct. Of course it was a campaign plan, and the participants knew that', he said. 'I get that some see this as an unscientific approach, but in this situation I think it is entirely justifiable.'

Debate

The effect of the campaign was initially less than what the scientists had hoped for. The task force published a series of articles this year in a minor journal, whilst a temporary ban on neonicotinoids had already gone into effect in Europe. That moratorium ends next year already, however. If there is a re-evaluation of the moratorium, the publications may well be significant. The articles have been picked up by anti-pesticide action groups in the United States as well, where there is no ban yet.

The debate surrounding the cause of the death of bees and other insects has been a hard fought battle for years already, in the Netherlands as well. Last year, Tennekes dragged Tjeerd Blacquièr, a bee researcher at Plant Research International, a company affiliated with Wageningen University, before the LOWI (Landelijk Orgaan Wetenschappelijke Integriteit [National Board for Research Integrity], the research integrity board of the KNAW (Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen [Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences]), because in Blacquièr's overview article, he had supposedly cited too selectively from previous literature, and in doing so played down the role of neonicotinoids. The complaint was declared unfounded. 'I think this group would come off as guilty if they had to go before the integrity board', said Blacquièr.

Box inset

Much less is needed

Neonicotinoids are a popular set of pesticides. They do not have to be sprayed; the seeds are dipped in before planting, as a result of which the concentration can be much lower. Since the beginning of this century, however, the agent has been associated with increased winter mortality among bees. Instead of the usual 10 percent, sometimes 30 to 60 percent of hives do not survive the winter. There is no consensus regarding the cause; various bee diseases and the loss of biodiversity are also viewed as culprits. Some scientists blame the entire decline in the number of insects and birds on neonicotinoids. Since December 2013 there has been a two-year moratorium in effect in Europe on the use of the agent for applications where bees would be most affected.