Pesticide Action Network Europe

Brussels, 13 September 2023

To: EU ministers of agriculture, environment and health

Subject: European Commission proposal for a Regulation on the Sustainable Use of Plant Protection Products(SUR) - Number of Working Group meetings on SUR file / Sensitive Areas

Dear Minister,

We are writing to you to share our views ahead of the next meeting of the Working Group on the Sustainable Use of Plant Protection Products Regulation (SUR) proposal.

1. The slow progress in the work on the SUR proposal is a matter of great concern for many stakeholders involved. The high relevance of this file, and the number of chapters to be analysed, require a large number of meetings. We would like to express to you our concern about the fact that only 4 meetings are planned under the Spanish presidency. Rather than increasing the intensity of discussions once the Member States are closer to reaching agreements, we would like to reiterate our request to already now **increase the number of scheduled meetings on the SUR file, in view of providing the room to reach agreements on the different provisions of the proposal.**

2. The chapter on **Sensitive areas** was postponed by the Council, until the publication of the additional study to the existing impact assessment of the SUR proposal, requested by the Council. On 5th of July 2023, the European Commission published the additional study. The overall results of the study confirm that a well-managed transition to decreased pesticide dependence will not impose negative effects on food security, on the contrary. This has also been repeatedly confirmed by the scientific community, which warns that the costs of inaction exceed the costs of the impacts of the SUR implementation. The climate and biodiversity crises, water, soil and landscape degradation and the associated loss of ecosystem services such as pollination and natural pest control, represent a major threat to food security. At the same time, pesticide use has a severe impact on human health, another reason for great societal concern.

Although the Sustainable Use of Pesticides Directive 2009/128/EC already imposed to minimise or prohibit the use of pesticides in sensitive areas, the lack of Member States' engagement in taking action has resulted in poor protection of citizens, biodiversity and the environment.

The SUR provides a not to miss opportunity to tackle these urgent challenges. **The designation and protection of sensitive areas is key in protecting human health as well as protecting water resources, biodiversity and ecosystem services.**

In order to **protect citizens, biodiversity and the environment**, a transition towards nature-inclusive, sustainable and pesticide-independent agricultural systems is pressing. At the same time, banning the use of pesticides, with the exception of low-risk non-synthetic and low-risk biocontrol substances in case all IPM measures have failed and the economic threshold for crop damage is exceeded, is needed in sensitive areas. These areas should include at least:

- all public areas (parks, gardens, recreation and sports grounds, …).
- human settlements and all urban areas, including private gardens and kitchen gardens.
- areas frequented by vulnerable groups. The definition of vulnerable groups should at the minimum also include women of all childbearing years, not merely pregnant women. However, all citizens, also men, are vulnerable to the health risks of pesticides.
- all houses, gardens and other private properties where people live, work or play. People, including vulnerable groups, often spend most of their time at home, where they should be protected from exposure to pesticides.
- railways, roads, airports and ports, industrial or commercial units, mines, dumps and construction sites.
- non-productive areas as defined under GAEC8 (Regulation (EU) 2021/2115.
- protected areas under Directive 2000/60/EC
- ecologically sensitive areas, including all nature 2000 areas (Directive 92/43.EEC and Directive 2009/147/EC), as well as all other regional or national protected areas in function of nature, habitat and biodiversity protection.
- areas around surface water bodies

In line with the above-mentioned protection measures, it is evident that also the use of pesticides for non-professional and/or non-agricultural uses should be prohibited, to protect citizens and the environment. A buffer as wide as possible should be installed around the above-mentioned areas. Based on available information on pesticide drift, biomonitoring studies and human risks and risks for biodiversity associated with pesticide exposure, buffers should have a width at least in the order of 100-500m. However, it is important to take into account that installed buffers should be as wide as possible. For example, biomonitoring studies show that concentrations of pesticides in humans are associated with the proximity of fields, and research shows that the number of pesticide residues in insects in nature areas is related to the proportion of agricultural production in a radius of 2,000 m.

The emergency use of non-low-risk pesticides in sensitive areas should not be allowed. A clear procedure and methods for solving the problem of pest occurrence in sensitive areas should be prepared and shared with Member States, taking into account geographical, climate and economic specifics, recommending the available alternative non-chemical solutions, starting with prevention, monitoring, physical and mechanical methods and biocontrol.

We would also like to take this opportunity to request a (digital) meeting with you to discuss and exchange thoughts on key elements of the SUR.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration,

Yours sincerely,

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Background information

People and animals are impacted through different exposure routes (inhalation, ingestion, dermal absorption, indoor dust, …). Pesticides are shown to **drift over far distances**, up to several kms, and are found on playgrounds and in our schools, offices and houses. Links have been shown between pesticide exposure and **many illnesses**, such as forms of cancers (e.g. Non-Hodgkin lymphoma, multiple myeloma, skin melanoma, ovarian, breast, brain, lip and prostate cancers) and neurodegenerative disorders (Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's disease). Extra vulnerable are also **women and children**, with pesticide exposure related to disturbances of the reproductive system[1,2], fertility disorders as well as neurodevelopmental alterations in newborns. Even low levels of pesticide exposure can interfere with the neurological and behavioural development of children (neonatal reflexes, psychomotor and mental development and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder)[3]. Pesticide exposure also is associated with risks for male's fertility. **Farmers, farmworkers and inhabitants of agricultural areas are also at particular risk of adverse health impacts by pesticides**[4,5], with data showing higher concentrations of pesticides in their blood and increased genotoxicity.

At the same time, given the **dramatic decline in biodiversity**[6,7,8]**, with research showing an over 75% decline in flying insect biomass in protected areas, as well as the high level of pesticide pollution in water bodies**, **soils and other ecosystems, associated with high societal costs**, the protection of nature areas and water bodies against pesticide exposure is urgent.

The additional study to the impact assessment, provided by the European Commission, concluded that a transition to pesticide-free management of public and urban areas is possible, without affecting overall financial costs and with positive effects on the environment. Multiple examples throughout Europe show how cities successfully abandon the use of pesticides, with extensive benefits for citizens and biodiversity, and increasing the attractiveness of urban areas.

[1] Bretveld et al., 2006. Pesticide exposure: the hormonal function of the female reproductive system disrupted?
[2] Farr et al. 2004. Pesticide use and menstrual cycle characteristics among premenopausal women in the Agricultural Health Study,
[3] Liu et al., 2012. Pesticide exposure and child neurodevelopment: summary and implications
[4] Figueiredo et al., 2019. Spatio-temporal variation of outdoor and indoor pesticide air concentrations in homes near agricultural fields
[5] Dereumeaux et al., 2020. Pesticide exposures for residents living close to agricultural lands: A review
[6] Hallmann et al., 2017. More than 75 percent decline over 27 years in total flying insect biomass in protected areas
[7] Brühl et al., 2021. Direct pesticide exposure of insects in nature conservation areas in Germany
[8] Rigal et al., 2023. Farmland practices are driving bird population decline across Europe

Case studies show that citizens have a strong preference for a more natural visual appearance and that they value fauna abundance and increased attractiveness of urban green spaces originating from a pesticide-free approach. Also in areas considered as challenging, like cemeteries and sports grounds, pesticide restrictions have been successfully implemented in different EU cities.

Ambitious protection of ecologically sensitive areas, such as Natura 2000 areas, is a prerequisite to counter the steep decline of biodiversity, loss of ecosystem services and natural heritage, and tackle the threat they pose to food security. There is great scientific consensus that biodiversity loss threatens our food systems in unprecedented ways, putting food security and nutrition at serious risk. Nature and biodiversity provide a wide range of ecosystem services (carbon storage, erosion protection, water purification, water storage, nutrient cycling, cooling, recreation, health benefits, …). The proximity of nature areas and rich biodiversity are important parameters for human wellbeing and the attractiveness and livability of urban as well as agricultural regions.