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Mourning the protection of pollinators in the EU:

How the European Commission, Member States and the EFSA gather to maintain a decades-long lack of protection of bees

On 16 and 17 July, a standing committee meeting on phytopharmaceutical products is gathering in Brussels to decide on the future of the so-called EFSA Bee Guidance Document (BGD), which is intended to protect honeybees, bumblebees and wild bees against the toxicity of pesticides.

Leaked documents inform us that a majority of Member States is converging to reform the BGD in a way that follows the pesticide industry's lobbying efforts to lower protection standards. This new step towards the burial of efficient measures to protect bees in Europe gives us a bitter taste of just how sincere the Commission is when it comes to the protection of biodiversity for the years to come.

According to leaked information, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) has given Member States four options to decide on the future of the BGD. Regrettably, all four options open the door to watering down the Bee Guidance Document.

Martin Dermine, Environment Policy Officer at PAN Europe, said: "*The BG document produced by EFSA in 2013 was a major improvement in terms of the level of protection afforded to bees; however, it was never approved by Member States as a result of lobbying pressure and scaremongering tactics on the part of the agroindustry. It is a scandal that a so-called 'independent' EU agency bends to the interests of pesticide companies and accepts to discard and disregard its own previous work*".

One of the four options is to use a mathematical model, the Beehave model¹, to define the 'acceptable' level of increase in bee mortality due to pesticides. The Beehave model was co-produced by Syngenta itself and was pushed by the European Crop Protection Association, which claims that a 20% mortality of forager bees is acceptable². Would a pig grower accept a 20% weight reduction in their piglets? According to our information, at least 15 Member States support such an approach.

¹ <http://beehave-model.net/>

² https://www.ecpa.eu/sites/default/files/document_policy/28028_ECPA%20Proposal%20for%20a%20protective%20and%20workable%20EU%20Bee%20Risk%20Assessment%20-%20Version%2009%20June%202017.pdf

“In 2015, the European Food Safety Authority expressed a mixed appreciation of the model³. Among others, the Authority put into question the data that was used to calibrate the model, claiming that it needed further assessment. The fact that EFSA is now suggesting to make use of this Syngenta model simply boggles the mind!” Dermine added.

While environmental NGOs and beekeepers’ associations were consulted on some aspects of the revision of the BGD, they were however not made aware of these four options.

“The von der Leyen Commission published its Biodiversity Strategy earlier this year, claiming that biodiversity ought to be protected and restored; yet, regrettably, tomorrow’s meeting will be an occasion for DG Sante, EFSA and Member States to ruin more than 10 years of efforts from scientists, beekeepers and environmentalists to upscale the protection of bees against toxic agrochemicals. It is a sad day for bees, and a sad day for the EU” Dermine concluded.

Last week, a new report⁴ by the European Court of Auditors (ECA), meant to assess the results of the Commissions’ efforts to protect pollinators, found once again that such efforts not only have not delivered, but have also not borne fruit. Having long been wary of the lack of concrete actions on the Commission’s side to improve the state of protection of pollinators, as well as to help farmers become independent from the agrochemical industry, in 2019 PAN Europe co-initiated the *Save Bees and Farmers*⁵ European Citizens Initiative, aimed at collecting 1 million signatures across the EU to demand that the Commission set forth legal acts to phase out synthetic pesticides over the next 15 years, restore biodiversity on farmland and support farmers in the transition towards agroecology. The initiative has collected over 420 000 signatures up to now and will run until 30 March 2021.

Background information: The BGD was developed by EFSA following the neonicotinoids saga and the identification of major gaps in the protection of bees against pesticides. The pesticide industry had taken part in the development of the previous weak guidance document that led to the approval of bee-killing neonicotinoid insecticides. Since its publication in 2013, the BGD was never approved by Member States⁶ because of a massive campaign carried out against it by the agrochemical industry, which claimed that a vast majority of its products would not be re-approved and that farmers would remain without pesticides if pollinator protection standards were to be scaled-up.

³ <https://efsa.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.2903/j.efsa.2015.4125>

⁴ <https://www.pan-europe.info/press-releases/2020/07/newly-released-eca-report-confirms-commission-inaction-wild-pollinator>

⁵ www.savebeesandfarmers.eu

⁶ <https://www.pan-europe.info/press-releases/2019/07/how-agrobusiness-and-member-states-join-forces-maintain-bee-toxic-pesticides>



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Pesticide Action Network (PAN) Europe is a network of NGOs working to reduce the use of hazardous pesticides and have them replaced with ecologically sound alternatives. We work to eliminate dependency on chemical pesticides and to support safe sustainable pest control methods. Our network brings together 40 consumer, public health, and environmental organisations, and women's groups from across Europe.