Brussels, 24 March 2022

Concerns: definition of the level of protection of wild bees against pesticides (Specific Protection Goals)

Dear Commissioner Kyriakides,
Dear Vice-President Timmermans,

With this letter, we would like to provide you with some comments regarding the ongoing work at the EU level to define the level of protection of wild bees against pesticides.

Wild bees play a major role in the pollination of our crops and the reproduction of wild plants. Furthermore, science has shown that a diversity of pollinators is vital to ensure the resilience of pollination ecosystem services and ensure higher fruits and vegetable yields. Protecting pollinators is thus of paramount importance to ensure the EU's food supplies and preserve biodiversity.

In January 2022, EFSA published a supporting document[1] to help risk managers set up Specific Protection Goals (SPG) for wild bees in the EU. In this document, EFSA claimed that the level of knowledge on wild bees is insufficient to define the SPGs based on background variability and suggested the possibility to apply the same SPGa as that decided for honey bees (10%). EFSA made a series of statements based on the available data obtained from regulatory field trials. Over the last weeks, it has appeared clearly that in such field trials, 'control fields' are also treated with pesticides and that 'test fields' are treated not only with the tested pesticide but also with other ones. Therefore, the basis of the work from EFSA is unscientific, and we ask you to disregard it. A control field should not be treated and grow on pesticide-free land. The tested field should be treated with the tested pesticide only.
The fact that control fields are sprayed with pesticides most probably interfere with the toxicity of tested pesticides while strongly and artificially increasing the variability in colonies in control fields. During the hearing of 3 March 2022, we were very shocked to hear the head of the Pesticides Unit, Mr Berend, justify this approach to avoid too much burden on the shoulders of the pesticides industry. We feel this kind of statement is in total opposition to the Biodiversity Strategy. The EU needs scientific and legally-sound regulatory tests to respect the pesticide law.
Risk assessors should correct and reject the unscientific habit of spraying the control fields with pesticides. We ask you to make sure that your services fix this major unscientific and illegal issue at once.

[1] https://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/supporting/pub/en-7125?utm_source=EFSA+Newsletters&utm_campaign=6df14a7de5-EMAIL_ALERTS_SCI_OUTPUT&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_7ea646dd1d-6df14a7de5-64013510

In our view, the level of protection of wild bees should be defined as an 'a priori' threshold constituting the level of harm we accept to be observed between the treated crop and the pesticide-free control crop. Before the catastrophic state of biodiversity and the lack of knowledge on what can be considered sustainable harm for wild pollinators, we ask you to aim at 0% harm. Indeed, having a Biodiversity Strategy that aims to restore biodiversity on the one hand and allow for a 10% reduction in wild bee populations each time they are exposed to a pesticide is not coherent. From a regulatory point of view, we consider that protocols should be created to determine a 3% difference between the control and the tested field. Indeed, the biology of bumble and solitary bees allows many more colonies/cocoons at the edge of treated fields thus, increasing statistical robustness. Allow us to remind you that field trials[2] permitted the detection of a 5% difference of effects due to pesticide exposure, for honey bees.

On top of protecting biodiversity, a strict protection target is necessary to account for the numerous shortcomings of the current approach: pesticides are tested on an individual basis, while wild bees are exposed to them the whole year round, their synergistic effects with other chemicals, pathogens, lack of food resources etc. remain unstudied and very little endpoints are measured with the current approach. Finally, it is highly probable that the test species are not the most sensitive ones, among the 1900 species of wild bees in the EU.

We thus ask you to make sure the European Commission makes a proposal to the Member States that is scientific and in line with the Biodiversity Strategy. We ask for a maximum of a 3% difference in wild bees between the control and the tested fields.

As the topic will be discussed on 30-31/3 in the PAFF Committee and Member States are now sufficiently informed on the topic, we ask you to put this issue at the agenda of the Agrifish Council meeting of 7/4. In doing so, more transparency on the position of the different Member States would allow for a more democratic process. This was done for the discussion around Specific Protection Goals for honey bees, we ask you to do it again for wild bees.

From beforehand, thank you for your consideration.

Best regards,

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Jeff Pettis, President of Apimondia
Nicolas Laarman, Executive Director of Pollinis
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[2] https://www.efsa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/topic/review-guidance-document-bees-specific-protection-goals.pdf