



Emergency authorisation of neonicotinoid thiamethoxam

A briefing by The Wildlife Trusts, January 2021



The Wildlife Trusts strongly oppose the Government's decision.

On Friday 8th January, the Government authorised the use of Cruiser SB for the treatment of sugar beet seed in 2021, in response to the risks posed by beet yellows virus. **This product contains the neonicotinoid, thiamethoxam, an incredibly harmful pesticide.** The Wildlife Trusts strongly oppose the Government's decision.

The Secretary of State, the Rt Hon George Eustice MP, agreed to a derogation in response to concerns that beet yellows virus - a virus spread by aphids - would damage sugar beet yield. This is despite a similar application being refused in 2018 by the UK Expert Committee on Pesticides because of unacceptable environmental risks. These risks have not changed.

The use of neonicotinoids will have a devastating impact on pollinators, wildflowers, and waterways - at a time when nature needs to be urgently put into recovery.

What are neonicotinoids and why are they harmful to nature?

Neonicotinoids are neurotoxic pesticides – they affect the nervous systems of bees and other insects, resulting in paralysis and death. Academic and author, Professor Dave Goulson, has warned that one teaspoon of this type of chemical is enough to kill 1.25 billion honeybees, equivalent to four lorryloads.

The emergency authorisation allows “seed-dressing” of sugar beet crops with neonicotinoids, a method of application that results in only 5% of the pesticide reaching the crop. The rest accumulates in the soil, where it can be absorbed by the roots of wildflowers and hedgerow plants visited by bees, or can leach into water sources and affect wildlife that lives there.

Sugar beet is a non-flowering crop, but flowering ‘weeds’ which also grow in fields will attract bees, both within the current growing season and in following years while the neonicotinoid is still present in the soil.

Worryingly, the UK Government accepts this risk and proposes to address this through additional herbicide use to control ‘weeds’ and ‘protect bees’ – meaning yet more pesticides on our fields.

Why is this a poor decision?

In 2018 the Government welcomed the EU-wide ban on neonicotinoid pesticides due to the harm they cause wildlife. The then-Environment Secretary, Rt Hon Michael Gove MP, said the UK would keep the ban after Brexit, unless the scientific evidence changed. It hasn't.

So why has the Government authorised their use? In December 2020 it was revealed the sugar industry and National Farmers Union (NFU) had lobbied the Government to authorise use of neonicotinoid thiamethoxam. Despite agreeing to the authorisation, the Government have not published the scientific evidence behind the derogation. There was also no consultation with other stakeholders or strategic allies like conservation NGOs. The environmental risk and process for taking this decision should be available to the public in a way that is transparent and accessible.

The NFU and British Sugar claim the pesticide seed treatment will be needed based on “unprecedented” infestations of peach potato aphid *Myzus persicae* seen in 2020. This is short sighted. Pest infestations are increasing because of wetter, warmer temperatures caused by climate change - neonicotinoids are not a long-term solution. Nature has a critical role in tackling climate change – but it cannot do this while under attack from lethal poisons.



SUGAR BEET

Isn't this authorisation temporary?

The Government states the current authorisation allows for the use of Cruiser SB on sugar beet only, in 2021 and in England. **However, Defra has recognised that this will likely continue for at least the following year and into 2023.** We fear this may instigate regular derogations and result in routine 'emergency' applications for neonicotinoid pesticides, instead of investing in resources and support for farmers to become sustainable long-term.

In Europe, investigations have found that emergency authorisations are often granted repeatedly or without any apparent evidence of an emergency situation as justification.

Even emergency use will likely have an impact on bee and pollinator populations. Insect populations have suffered drastic declines in the UK. Recent evidence suggests we have lost 50% or more of our insects since 1970, and 41% of the Earth's remaining five million insect species are 'threatened with extinction'. This has far-reaching consequences for both wildlife and people - with a third of our food crops pollinated by insects there is a lot to lose.

What are the alternatives?

We know many farmers feel they have no alternative but to use this neonicotinoid given the concerns. The Wildlife Trusts believe that farmers should not have to choose between nature or crop, pollinators or pesticides.

Through continued research into disease-resistant varieties and Government support for Integrated Pest Management (IPM), sugar beet growers can move away from the reliance on highly damaging chemical pesticides. There are currently no organic sugar beet growers in the UK, although organic beet has been grown in the past and the end of production seems

Key information

The Government has bowed to lobbying from the sugar industry and authorised the use of the harmful neonicotinoid pesticide, thiamethoxam.

Neonicotinoids kill bees, as well as impacting nearby wildflowers, hedgerows and waterways.

The Government has made international commitments to protect nature - so why will it not protect wildlife in its own fields?

The authorisation is short sighted. The aphid infestations are becoming more frequent because of warmer temperatures caused by climate change. Nature has a critical role to play in tackling climate change - but it cannot do this if it is under attack from lethal neonicotinoids.

to be based on a decision by British Sugar not to buy organic beet, rather than farmers giving up on organic production. Organic sugar beet production in the EU shows that it is possible to produce sugar beet without neonicotinoids.

Furthermore, since the refusal of emergency authorisation in 2018, the British Beet Research Organisation (BBRO) have conducted trials to assess varietal resistance to virus yellows and have identified varieties which are far more resistant to virus yellows than a traditional susceptible variety.

Emergency pesticide authorisation risks slowing down crucial research on these alternatives. Without these alternatives, climate change will make the need for neonicotinoids even greater in the future.

The Government should be focusing funding and efforts on regenerative farming approaches, supporting more farmers to make the transition to IPM and become more resilient to climate change so they can continue to produce nutritional food which is good for people and also has a positive effect on wildlife.

What can MPs do to help?

- Write to the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister, urging this decision be overturned
- Take part in the Environment Bill's Report Stage on Tuesday 26th January and speak out on behalf of bees and other wildlife. See [the briefing here](#).
- Make your views heard on social media - tag us on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#)
- Share [The Wildlife Trusts' petition](#) with your networks and constituents



GARDEN BUMBLEBEE © CHRIS GOMERSALL / 2020VISION

No matter where you live in the UK, there is a Wildlife Trust inspiring people about the natural world. Each day we work to save, protect and stand up for the wildlife and wild places near you.

Supported by more than 850,000 members, we take action on our 2,300 nature reserves, through our work with landowners, farmers and policy makers, and by encouraging everybody to look after wildlife where they live. We hope that you will join us.

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