



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

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Dame Meg Hillier MP
House of Commons
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Your ref: MH75131
Our ref: MC2022/02982/JM

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18 February 2022

Dear Dame Meg,

Thank you for your email of 7 February to the Secretary of State on behalf of your constituents about an emergency authorisation for the limited use of a neonicotinoid seed treatment on the 2022 sugar beet crop. I am replying as the Minister responsible for this policy area.

The decision taken to grant the emergency authorisation was informed by assessments and advice from the Health and Safety Executive, the UK Expert Committee on Pesticides and Defra's Chief Scientific Adviser. Having considered their comments and analysis in full, the Secretary of State has decided to grant the emergency authorisation in order to provide emergency protection against viruses which have significantly impacted yields of the sugar beet crop in previous years.

Emerging sugar beet seedlings and young plants are vulnerable to feeding by aphids, which transmit several viruses, known collectively as Yellows Virus (YV), which lead to reduced beet size, lower sugar content and higher impurities. Overall sugar beet yield can be reduced by up to 50%. Neonicotinoid seed treatments provide emerging beet crops with highly effective protection. Without the seed treatments, crops are vulnerable. In 2020, aphid levels were at their highest since the 1970s, leading to sugar beet yield losses of 24%.

The emergency authorisation includes strict conditions which are designed to minimise the potential risks to bees and other pollinators. These include a reduced application rate, prohibition on any flowering crop being planted within 32 months of treated sugar beet and a threshold for use requiring that the product will only be used if the predicted virus incidence is at least 19%. These conditions are tougher than those set in 2021 – the exclusion period for flowering crops is longer and the threshold virus level is higher. It should be pointed out that the neonicotinoid seed treatment was not used on the 2021 sugar beet crop, as the threshold for use under the 2021 authorisation was not met.

The EU restricted three neonicotinoid pesticides, including thiamethoxam, in 2018 due to evidence of their harm to pollinators. The UK supported this move. Emergency authorisations of pesticides are used by countries across Europe. Twelve EU countries including Belgium, Denmark and Spain have granted emergency authorisations for neonicotinoid seed treatments since 2018. The UK's approach to the use of emergency authorisations has not changed as a result of the UK's exit from the EU.

The sugar beet industry is developing alternative approaches to the management of YV, including breeding YV resistant strains of sugar beet through traditional and potential gene editing routes. Those alternatives are of crucial importance. That is why the Government is incentivising sustainable approaches to pest management. For example, it is planning to include Integrated Pest Management as a standard within the Sustainable Farming Incentive in 2023. Through this scheme, the Government will pay farmers to produce public goods, including biodiversity and animal health and welfare.

The Government is committed to taking action to improve the state of our bees and other pollinating insects. The Pollinator Strategy is a 10-year plan which sets out how Government, conservation groups, farmers, beekeepers and researchers can work together to improve the status of pollinating insect species in England. The National Action Plan on Sustainable Pesticide Use, to be published later this year, will also set out measures to minimise the risks and impacts of pesticides to human health and the environment, while ensuring pests and pesticide resistance are managed effectively.

I hope this sets out the reasons for the decision. For further information on the decision, please see Defra's statement:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/neonicotinoid-product-as-seed-treatment-for-sugar-beet-emergency-authorisation-application>

Please do not hesitate to get in touch if you need further information.

Yours sincerely,



VICTORIA PRENTIS MP