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To save the insect world we must go way beyond neonicotinoid ban

Europe's bold ban on bee-harming insecticides is a positive step, but much more is needed if we are to avoid ecological disaster



The EU's move is a good first step

Emmanuel Dunand/AFP/Getty

By Dave Goulson

The vote to ban all outdoor use of the three main neonicotinoid insecticides in the European Union is a step in the right direction. It is a very welcome one, too, given the ongoing evidence of catastrophic insect loss, in particular the recent evidence from Germany of a 76 per cent decline in flying insect biomass from 1989 to 2016.

There is abundant evidence from lab and field studies that neonicotinoids are harmful to bees, and a growing body of evidence linking them to declines of butterflies, aquatic insects and insect-eating birds. The EU decision is logical, based on a major review of

the evidence – spanning 1500 studies – by the European Food Safety Authority, and in line with earlier reviews of the impacts of neonics such as that published by the European Academy of Sciences in 2015.

It also shows that the EU has some spine, for this decision was taken in the face of a major lobbying effort by the powerful agrochemical industry and strong opposition from the UK's National Farmers Union. Encouragingly, the UK voted for the ban – to take effect this year – even though only last year it was staunchly opposed to further restrictions on these chemicals, already subject to a partial moratorium. Perhaps UK environment secretary Michael Gove is as green as he says he is.

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So, good news for bees and other insects, and for the environment. However, don't get too excited. If these chemicals are simply replaced by similar compounds such as the tongue-twistingly titled sulfoxaflor, cyantraniliprole or flupyradifurone (all new systemic and neurotoxic insecticides), then we will simply be going round in circles.

The last 70 years has seen the introduction of a succession of new pesticides, only for them to be banned a decade or two later when the harm they do becomes apparent. We need to break this cycle. What is really needed is a move towards truly sustainable farming that minimises pesticide use, encourages natural enemies of crop pests, and supports biodiversity and healthy soils.

We should also be aware that neonics are far from being the only problem facing bees and other insects. They are also having to cope with accidentally imported parasites and diseases, a lack of flowers and nesting habitat, exposure to a blizzard of other pesticides and pollutants, and a rapidly changing climate. Little wonder that the poor creatures aren't thriving.

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Many people are not fond of insects. They associate them with buzzing, biting and stinging, or think of them as pests, spreaders of disease. But love them or hate them, there is no doubt that insects are at the heart of life on Earth. The good they do vastly outweighs any harm. Insects make up the majority of known species, they pollinate our crops and most wild plants, they recycle dung, dead trees, leaves and corpses, they help control pests and to keep the soil healthy, and they are food for the majority of birds, lizards, frogs, bats and more.

It may sound melodramatic, but if we lose these creatures then life on Earth will collapse. Banning neonicotinoids is a positive step, but we have a very long way to go if we are to halt insect declines and ensure that both we and the bees have a future.

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