DAVID WILLETTS'S MEETING WITH SYNGENTA

NEONICOTINOIDS AND BEES

Background

1. Several studies have suggested that low doses of neonicotinoids could have sub-lethal effects on bees with consequences for bee populations. Defra takes any threat to bees very seriously and has consistently made it clear that it will take proportionate action to restrict the use of these products if the evidence shows the need.

2. Defra has kept evidence on neonicotinoids under open-minded scrutiny, assessing new studies as they emerge and considering how they alter the overall picture. We have taken advice from the independent expert Advisory Committee on Pesticides, which has considered the evidence on several occasions. The Committee advised, following its latest meeting on 29 January this year, that there were grounds for a review of neonicotinoid authorisations under pesticides legislation. This work is being taken forward by the HSE's Chemicals Regulation Directorate, as the UK pesticides regulator.

3. We have not simply assessed evidence produced by others. Independent experts advised that there was a need for further experimental evidence on the issue of whether bees may face harmful exposure to neonicotinoids in field conditions. We therefore commissioned our own research, which was completed in March 2013, to explore further the impacts of neonicotinoids on bumble bees in field conditions. Following this work, we have produced an assessment of the key evidence about neonicotinoids and bees to help inform national and international considerations of this issue. The assessment cannot exclude rare effects of neonicotinoids on bees in the field. However, it suggests that effects on bees do not occur under normal circumstances.

4. Neonicotinoids are important insecticides. Their use as seed treatments allows effective control of crops at the earliest stage of crop development and they control pests that are increasingly becoming resistant to other products. Although there are uncertainties, Defra's assessment suggests that it is highly probable that restrictions on neonicotinoids would carry significant costs for agriculture.

5. The European Commission have drawn up plans for a ban on the use of three neonicotinoids on a long list of crops. The three neonicotinoids include one – thiamethoxam – marketed by Syngenta. The proposal was put to the Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health on 15 March and failed to get a qualified majority (only 13 member states supported). The Commission can now take the proposal to the appeal committee and have indicated that they will do so around the end of April. At the appeal committee a qualified majority against the Commission is required to prevent them from adopting their proposal which would be binding in all member States.

6. Defra has urged the Commission to complete their scientific assessment, taking account of our new research, and to assess the impacts of action so that any measures proposed are proportionate to the risks identified. The results of the field study strengthen our view that the evidence does not support sweeping restrictions on neonicotinoids as proposed by the Commission. The Secretary of State has written to the Commission and member states to send them the field study and to explain that the UK assessment of the current evidence is that widespread restrictions would not be a proportionate response.

7. It is unlikely that it will prove possible to assemble a qualified majority against the Commission's proposal. Realistically we have to demonstrate strong opposition and seek to persuade the Commission to reconsider.

Lines to take

- The UK considers that decisions should be made on the scientific evidence. If the evidence justifies action, that action should be proportionate to the risks identified.
- We have looked closely at the evidence on this issue and have carried out our own research. Our conclusion is that it is not possible to rule out rare effects of neonicotinoids on bees in the field. However, the risk to bee populations from neonicotinoids, as they are currently used, is low.
- We therefore do not support the Commission proposal and have argued strongly that they should reconsider. We have sent our own field research to the Commission and member States and Defra's Chief Scientific Adviser has met Commission officials and EFSA to discuss the implications of the science.
- The Commission persuaded 13 member States to support their proposal in the Standing Committee. It is therefore unlikely that there will be a qualified majority against in the appeal committee. However, there remains strong opposition to the Commission proposal and the UK will continue to press them to change course.