

Expanding the farmer's toolbox: Towards low-risk pesticides?

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Event Coverage

Pressure grows for moves towards biological low-risk pesticides, reports Rory Watson.



Expanding the farmer's toolbox: Towards low-risk pesticides? | *Photo credit: Fotolia*

European health and food safety Commissioner Vytenis Andriukaitis has confirmed that initiatives will be taken later this year that could lead to existing EU pesticides legislation being updated to encourage the use of biological low-risk products.

He gave the commitment at a roundtable event last week hosted by Czech S&D group MEP Pavel Poc on 'Biological low-risk pesticides for sustainable integrated pest management: a multi-stakeholder approach'. The event was organised with the support of the PA International Foundation.

The meeting confirmed wide-ranging support for low-risk pesticides and took place just weeks after the European Parliament, almost unanimously, adopted a resolution, strongly championed by Poc, calling on the European Commission to submit, before the end of 2018, draft legislation to make it easier to place biological low-risk pesticides on the market.

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Andriukaitis confirmed the Commission would launch a public survey in the autumn to assess whether incentives in the 2009 EU plant protection products regulation, to encourage low-risk pesticides, should be strengthened. The Commission will also present later in the year a comprehensive report on implementation of the 2009 sustainable use of pesticides directive.

"It is important to make progress in this area and increase the availability of low-risk products to expand the toolbox of farmers with more sustainable options to protect their crops," Andriukaitis told participants.

At the same time, he pointed out that authorisation of low-risk products is a national responsibility. It was incumbent on governments, as well as industry, to propose "new sustainable tools supported by studies investigating their safety," he added.

Dr Gert Dohle from the Erasmus Medical Centre, explained endocrine disrupting chemicals (EDCs) can be caused by various factors, one of which is pesticides. EDCs are widely present and linked to various health issues, such as low sperm quality, obesity and diabetes.

His Rotterdam-based institute's research, he said, has shown "testicular cancer is on the increase in most western countries". In the Netherlands, it has doubled between 1990 and 2015.

Failure to tackle the impact of EDCs, he warned, was costing €150bn annually, according to a recent paper in Nature magazine.

Dr Wendy Yared, Director of the European Cancer Leagues, said that the use of over 200,000 tonnes of conventional pesticides every year in the EU posed considerable health risks. "We do need to limit the use of conventional pesticides, while promoting safer alternatives," she said, calling for existing legislation to be amended in line with the Parliament's resolution.

Greenpeace EU director Jorgo Riss acknowledged that replacing synthetic pesticides with biologically based ones would represent progress, but in itself, would not be sufficient to bring a more natural and sustainable balance to European agriculture.

The issue should be seen "in a wider ecological context" with greater emphasis on helping nature to look after itself, rather than simply resorting to pesticides. The diversity that ecological agriculture can bring increases natural resistance to both climate change and pests, he explained.

Riss argued that firm implementation of existing EU legislation, rather than attempts to draft new

measures, was the most effective way to encourage the move away from synthetic pesticides. Looking further ahead, he called for EU agriculture ministers to be joined by their health and environment colleagues in the next round of common agricultural policy reform.

Martin Dermine, Honeybee Project Coordinator at the Pesticide Action Network Europe, also stressed firm implementation. He criticised the many exemptions to EU legislation designed to protect bees from harmful pesticide effects. "Overall, 44 per cent of derogations are not requested by farmers, but by the seed and trade industry," he pointed out.

David Cary, Executive Director of the International Biocontrol Manufacturers Association, predicted that "a majority of the new plant protection products in Europe will be biological and a majority of these will pose low risk".

As a result, he maintained their authorisation should be fast-tracked and he urged EU regulators to accelerate their legislative deliberations to enable this to happen as quickly as possible.

Jean-Philippe Azoulay, Director General of the European Crop Protection Association, confirmed that his organisation also "supports accelerating the authorisation of low risk substances".

Summing up the discussions, Poc - a Vice-Chair of the European Parliament's influential environment, public health and food safety committee - said wide-ranging thought should be given to how the existing EU pesticide authorisation system could be improved.

The report on implementation of the plant protection products regulation, where the Czech S&D MEP is parliamentary rapporteur, is one opportunity to do this. The deliberations will have to include consideration of alternative products for farmers and priorities. "Can we prioritise economics over health? I don't think so," he said.

Finally, he called for the use of frank language in the debate ahead so that the consequences of choices and decisions are clearly understood. "I hope we will one day find such a language and teach ourselves to use it".

About the author

Rory Watson is a Brussels-based freelance journalist

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