

Farmers plot their return to bee-killer pesticides

Ben Webster Environment Editor

Farmers are seeking an “emergency” exemption from a European ban on a pesticide blamed for causing a decline in honeybees.

Members of the National Farmers’ Union are secretly preparing an application to plant oilseed rape seeds coated in neonicotinoid pesticides.

The pesticides were banned by the European Union in 2013 after the European Food Safety Authority concluded that tests had identified risks to bees.

Farmers will argue that their application to the Chemicals Regulation Directorate, part of the Health and Safety Executive, for a temporary derogation is necessary because the ban has resulted in thousands of acres of oilseed rape being damaged by flea beetle.

The pest destroyed more than 40 per cent of the oilseed rape planted last September in parts of Hampshire, Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire.

Guy Smith, vice-president of the NFU, who farms near Clacton-on-Sea in Essex, said his crop had been badly damaged because he had been unable to use neonicotinoids.

He said an alternative to neonicotinoids was to spray crops multiple times with pyrethroid insecticides, but they often failed to kill flea beetle, which were increasingly resistant to them. Denmark, Finland, Romania, Estonia and Bulgaria have already granted their farmers a derogation allowing them to use neonicotinoids this year.

Britain voted against the neonicotinoid ban in 2013, arguing that there was insufficient evidence of the harm it caused to bees. Some scientists say the ban was based on flawed laboratory experiments in which bees were given unrealistically high doses.

Syngenta, the company which makes one of the banned pesticides, withdrew an application for an emergency derogation last July when it became clear it would not be approved in time for autumn planting. Owen Paterson, the environment secretary, wanted to approve the application but it was blocked by cabinet colleagues.

Sir Mark Walport, the government’s

chief scientific adviser, who argued against the ban in 2013, signalled yesterday that he might revise his view.

Speaking in London at the annual convention of the Crop Protection Association, which represents pesticide companies, Sir Mark said he would be “strongly guided by the conclusions” of a review

that will be undertaken into recent research on neonicotinoids.

The review will be carried out by Professor Charles Godfray and Professor Angela McLean, of the University of Oxford. Professor McLean said last year that the ban raised a “major question” about whether farmers would respond to the ban by switching to “older but more dangerous chemicals”.

Sandra Bell, Friends of the Earth nature campaigner, said: “Neonicotinoid pesticides are harmful to bees and should have no place on our farms or gardens. The UK government must now listen to the science and support a permanent ban on neonicotinoids and extend it to all uses.”

The Chemicals Regulation Directorate will conduct a risk assessment of the application which will then be reviewed by the independent Expert Committee on Pesticides. The final decision will be taken by ministers at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Department for Work and Pensions and Department of Health.

Thunderer, page 30

