
Pesticides blamed for killing bees

The collapse in Britain's bee population is being made worse by pesticides that are banned in much of EU, according to a new study.

By Louise Gray, Environment Correspondent

Published: 7:00AM BST 09 Sep 2009

In recent years bee populations around the world have plummeted, with British beekeepers losing a fifth of hives over last winter.

But the cause of the sudden decline has not been identified.



A honey bee worker collecting nectar from red clover flowers Photo: GETTY

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Now a new study by the insect research charity Buglife and the Soil Association has claimed the decline was caused in part by a group of pesticides called neonicotinoids.

The "systemic" chemical, that kills unwanted insects by getting into the cell of the plant, is widely used on farms in Britain for crops like oilseed rape and the production of pot plants.

It is already restricted for use in much of Europe including France and Germany after beekeepers claimed the chemical was killing honey bees.

However it is found in the UK in products including Chinook, used on oilseed rape and Bayer UK 720, that is used in the production of pot plants and therefore ends up in gardens and homes around the country.

The new study brought together a number of peer-reviewed pieces of research. It concluded that neonicotinoid pesticide damages the health and life cycle of bees over the long term by affecting the nervous system.

"[Neonicotinoids] may be a significant factor contributing to current bee declines and could also contribute to declines in other non-target invertebrate species," the report read.

Matt Shardlow, chief executive of Buglife, called for a ban on the pesticides.

"Other countries have already introduced bans to prevent neonicotinoids from harming bees," he said. "This is the most comprehensive review of the scientific evidence yet and it has revealed the disturbing amount damage these poisons can cause."

The study also looked at the approval process for pesticides in the UK. It concluded that there are not enough tests to look at the long term effects on insects that are not pests.

Peter Melchett, Director of the Soil Association, said pesticides were causing a continued decline in pollinating insects, risking a multimillion pound farming industry.

"The UK is notorious for taking the most relaxed approach to pesticide safety in the EU; Buglife's report shows that this puts at risk pollination services vital for UK agriculture", he said.

However Dr Julian Little of pesticide manufacturer Bayer CropScience, said pesticides are not approved unless it is found they have no effects on insects like bees.

"When it comes to bee health, pesticides are not the problem, disease is," he said.

Buglife will be presenting the report to Michael Jacobs, the Prime Minister's Special Advisor on Environmental Issues, at a bee summit at Number 10 Downing Street.

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