

## European Commission: Scientists find neonicotinoids don't harm bees, restrictions hurt farmers—but support permanent ban

Every time I think the European Union's regulatory bureaucrats have bottomed out on substance and integrity, they find a way to sink even lower.

In February, I [wrote](#) about how the European Union has rigged the evaluation of whether state-of-the-art neonicotinoid pesticides (“neonics”) are “bee-safe” by using a “Bee Guidance Review Document” whose test conditions were made deliberately impossible to satisfy. (For those of you just tuning in, neonics, introduced in the 1990's, are currently the most widely used class of pesticides. Mainly applied as seed coatings to crops, they are taken up into the plant and selectively control only the pests that actually damage or destroy crops while minimizing exposure to humans, animals and beneficial insects—including bees.)

Since then, however, the stakes in the EU crop protection drama have only increased. The pressure from activists has intensified—as have the EU's manipulative and dishonest regulatory machinations. (How appropriate that Machiavelli was from an EU country.)

In recent weeks, the European Commission leaked to the press that it intended to move forward with a “total ban” on neonics that would include the few crops for which neonics are still allowed. Because these are all “non-bee-attractive” crops—i.e. plants such as sugar beets that bees don't pollinate and have no interest in ever visiting—the expanded ban would have little scientific justification.

It does, however, keep up the momentum as the European Commission deliberates on the future of its 2013 partial neonic ban. The decision is due sometime this fall, about the same time the European Court of Justice rules on an industry lawsuit challenging the legal and scientific basis for the partial ban.

Into this politically fraught situation, however, an “inconvenient truth” has suddenly emerged.

It seems that in the first year after the beginning of the ban, the European Commission tasked what they call their “science and knowledge service”—the Joint Research Center (JRC)—to look into what effect it was having on farmers and bees. The results of the JRC's study have been available for some time—to the Commission. But as recently described by Matt Ridley in a London *Times* [column](#), the Commission has been doing everything it can to keep the study and its findings from being made public. It's no wonder.

After Ridley broke the story in the *Times*, investigative reporters at Politico EU were able to get hold of a copy of the report and posted it on their website. The [JRC's assessment](#) documents reveals nothing less than a regulation-induced calamity. With neonic seed treatments withdrawn from the market, farmers were forced to massively increase spraying with older, much more ecologically harmful pesticides that significantly increased the costs to farmers but still couldn't adequately cope with mounting pest pressures.

There's more: The kicker was that the ban produced no benefit—zero, none, zip—to bees or other beneficial insects—which was, after all, the whole point of the wrong-headed exercise.

Meanwhile, the harm to farmers has been severe. A recent Newcastle University study, for instance, shows that [in 2016 oilseed rape acreage in the UK fell for the fourth straight year and UK farmers lost £18.4 million and almost 28,800 hectares of crops due to the ban.](#)

Factual reality has been a problem for the European Commission for some time now. Soon after they banned neonics to prevent the putative collapse of honeybee populations—the so-called “bee-pocalypse” touted by thousands of activist press releases and mainstream media headlines—it became apparent they hadn't bothered to look at their own official statistics on honeybee hives.

Those official statistics—all readily available on public websites—showed that far from collapsing, honeybee populations were *rising*, and have been ever since neonics came on the market in the mid-1990's.

This might have caused embarrassment, if Eurocrats were capable of experiencing such a basic human emotion. Instead they simply deleted all the EC documents warning of the bee-pocalypse from the web, hoping no one would notice.

Then, in a striking bit of Orwellian [newspeak](#), EU health and food safety Commissioner Andriukaitis claimed that the 2013 ban was “at no time based on a direct link on bee mortality.” Rather, [he explained](#), the ban was instituted simply because the “approval criteria were no longer satisfied”—criteria derived from the rigged, unapproved “Bee Guidance Document” mentioned above. This is the sort of bureaucratic doubletalk that has caused EU regulators to be so despised.

That brings us to the larger backdrop—not just of environmental policy, but of politics. The UK has already begun its withdrawal from the EU, in large measure because of overweening, one-size-fits-all EU regulations adopted in an imperious, unaccountable manner. The defeated candidate in France's recent presidential election, Marine Le Pen, threatened a similar, nationalism-driven withdrawal or curtailment of that country's EU participation—a circumstance unthinkable only several years ago.

Elsewhere around Europe, other nationalistic parties and leaders are tapping the same vein of resentment against the EU's bureaucratic-regulatory overreach—while Putin's Russia looms on the sidelines, gloating at the prospect of the European experiment coming unglued and ready to pounce on the resulting divisions if and when it does.

In this environment, one might think that EU regulators would tread more carefully. Farmers and agribusiness companies still wield significant economic and political clout, and they should be given at least as much weight in decision making as the noisy, self-interested environmental lobbyists who seem to monopolize EU officials' attention and enjoy privileged access to their deliberations. But after so many years of politicization of public policy and scorn for science, for Eurocrats the worst has become the norm.

A version of this article appeared at Forbes as “[Pesticide Regulation In The European Union: The Worst Has Become The Norm](#)” and has been republished here with permission from the author.

Henry Miller, a physician and molecular biologist, is the Robert Wesson Fellow in Scientific Philosophy and Public Policy at Stanford University’s Hoover Institution. He was the founding director of the FDA’s Office of Biotechnology. Follow him on Twitter [@henryimiller](#).