

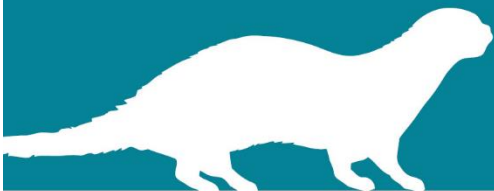


The  
**Wildlife**  
Trusts

# Authorisation of banned neonicotinoids

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The Wildlife Trusts briefing - January 2024



## The Wildlife Trusts strongly oppose the UK Government's repeated decision to allow emergency use of toxic neonicotinoid pesticides

On 18<sup>th</sup> January 2024, the UK Government authorised the use of Cruiser SB for the treatment of sugar beet seed in 2024, following an application from British Sugar.

**This product contains the neonicotinoid, thiamethoxam, an incredibly harmful banned pesticide that pollutes our waterways and harms bees and other pollinators.**

This comes on the same day that the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) has warned that the UK Government is largely off track on their Environmental Improvement Plan targets, including their goal to manage exposure to chemicals and pesticides.



The Government has ignored independent advice from the Expert Committee on Pesticides and approved the use of this harmful chemical on our fields for the fourth year in a row – regardless of an industry commitment to end reliance on the banned pesticide in 2023.

Despite the emergency authorisation being granted in 2022 and 2023, the proportion of farmers who decided against using neonics was [29% and 40% respectively](#). This shows that an increasing number of growers are trying to farm in a way that does not harm nature or rivers – yet there is no support for these growers from the industry or Government. **The UK Government has instead focused on short term solutions that will undermine the long-term sustainability of the farming sector and disadvantage those growers trying to do the best for nature.**

Nature has a critical role to play in both integrated pest management solutions and tackling climate change - but it cannot do this if it is under attack from lethal neonicotinoids.

### What are neonicotinoids and why are they harmful to nature?

Neonicotinoids are neurotoxic pesticides – they affect the nervous systems of bees and other insects, resulting in paralysis and eventually death. Academic and author, Professor Dave Goulson, has warned that one teaspoon of this type of chemical is enough to kill 1.25 billion honeybees, equivalent to four lorryloads.

The emergency authorisation allows “seed-coating” of sugar beet crops with neonicotinoids, a method of application that results in only 5% of the pesticide reaching the crop. The rest accumulates in the soil, where it can be absorbed by the roots of wildflowers and hedgerow plants visited by bees, or can leach into water sources and affect wildlife that lives there.

Sugar beet is a non-flowering crop, but flowering ‘weeds’ which also grow in fields will attract bees, both within the current growing season and in following years while the neonicotinoid is still present in the soil.

Worryingly, the UK Government accepts this risk and proposes to address this through additional herbicide use to control 'weeds' and 'protect bees' – meaning yet more pesticides on our fields.

**Recent research has also uncovered the damage neonicotinoids do to our rivers and waterways. Harmful neonicotinoids have now been found in more than 10% of English rivers, despite a widespread ban of these chemicals in 2018. In more than half of the rivers where neonics were detected, they were at levels which posed a significant risk to wildlife.**

## Why is this a bad decision?

Authorising the use of neonicotinoids puts our natural environment at dramatic risk and flies in the face of both expert advice and the UK's international commitments, such as the COP15 commitment to reduce the risk from pesticides and highly hazardous chemicals by at least half by 2030.

Both the Expert Committee on Pesticides (ECP) and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) object to the authorisation of Cruiser SB, having concluded that the potential risk to bees and other pollinators outweighs the benefits of granting the authorisation. What's more, a European High Court ruling on 19<sup>th</sup> January 2023 found that authorisations for using neonicotinoids were never justified.

Pest infestations increase in response to wetter, warmer temperatures caused by climate change. Using neonicotinoids is not a long-term solution. Nature has a critical role to play in tackling climate change – but it cannot do this while under attack from lethal poisons.

There is no economic argument for this authorisation either. The average annual economic impact of beet yellows virus is estimated at £14.4 million. In comparison, a University of Reading study estimated that in 2012 pollinating bees contributed £651 million to the UK economy.

## What about our national and international targets?

Allowing the use of neonicotinoids undermines the UK's domestic and international targets on nature and climate.

Through the Global Biodiversity Framework at COP15 in Montreal, the UK Government committed to halve the environmental impacts of damaging pesticides by 2030. It is



Buff-tailed bumble bee nectaring in a flower-rich field margin in Cambridgeshire (Chris Gomersall)

undermining this crucial global agreement to tackle biodiversity loss by allowing fields at home to be laced with toxic pesticides.

Pollinators are vital for both food production and enhancing biodiversity. Without thriving populations of pollinators in the UK, we will struggle to halt the decline of wildlife more broadly, leaving us unable to harness nature's ability to adapt and mitigate the impacts of climate change.

## Farmers supporting nature are being disadvantaged

We know some farmers feel they have no alternative but to use Cruiser SB to protect their sugar beet from the virus. However, data from Defra on the performance of the 2022 and 2023 sugar beet crop shows that farmers are managing without neonicotinoids like Cruiser SB.

29% of the sugar beet growers planted non-Cruiser SB treated seeds in 2022, and 40% of farmers in 2023. An increasing number of farmers are choosing to turn away from neonicotinoids and grow sugar beet without thiamethoxam. In the crop that did not use thiamethoxam, actual virus incidence was just 6% in 2022 and 11% in 2023, despite modelling suggesting national virus incidences in those years of 69% and 68%.

## Importantly, Defra's own economic analysis found there was little impact of the beet yellows virus on sugar beet yield in untreated crops.

Through continued research into disease-resistant varieties and Government support for Integrated Pest Management (IPM), there will soon be even more options for sugar beet growers to reduce reliance on highly damaging chemical pesticides. Though there are currently no organic sugar beet growers in the UK, organic beet has been grown in the past and British Sugar need to provide opportunities for growers to take up organic practices. Elsewhere in the EU, organic sugar beet production is increasing, showing that it is possible to produce sugar beet without neonicotinoids.

**Emergency pesticide authorisation risks slowing down crucial research on these alternatives.** Without these alternatives, climate change will only lead to increased demand for neonicotinoids.

## Isn't this authorisation temporary?

The UK Government states the current authorisation allows for the use of Cruiser SB only on sugar beet sown in 2024. However, the same application for emergency use has now been successful for four years in a row - despite an industry commitment to end reliance on the banned pesticide in 2023.

When British Sugar and the NFU have applied for emergency authorisation previously, they included a timeline that suggested they would have suitable alternatives in place by 2024, meaning 2023 would be the final year they requested emergency authorisation. When talking about alternatives, they now point to the development of virus-resistant sugar beet varieties using gene-editing, but admit these will not be commercially available for at least another 5 years.

Even emergency use will likely have an impact on bee and pollinator populations. Insect populations have suffered drastic declines in the UK. Recent evidence suggests we have lost 50% or more of our insects since 1970, and 41% of the Earth's remaining five million insect species are 'threatened with extinction'. This has far-reaching consequences for both wildlife and people - with a third of our food crops pollinated by insects there is a lot to lose.

## If farmers cannot use pesticides, won't sugar be imported instead?

We can understand concerns that halting pesticide use would lead to the UK having to import more sugar. The Wildlife Trusts believe our society shouldn't have to make a choice between environmental harms at home or overseas. We want to see farming in the UK work with nature, not against it, and we want to see strong trade core standards which assess the full environmental impacts of our imports so the UK is not offsetting our environmental impacts abroad.