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Pro-pesticide groups misleading UK public into thinking that pesticide use is going down

UK citizens are being misinformed by pro-pesticide lobby groups who are using flawed data to suggest that pesticide use in UK agriculture is decreasing. Research published today by the Pesticide Action Network UK (PAN UK) reveals how, by most internationally accepted measures, UK pesticide use is in fact rising, and consequently so is the exposure of citizens and the natural environment to their harmful impacts.(1)

Pesticide advocates regularly bat away rising public concern over the toxic effects of pesticides and resist calls for stricter regulations by claiming that ‘the amount of pesticides used in the UK has halved since 1990’. But employing this statistic to show that pesticides are no longer a problem is misleading.

“This statistic is based purely on weight”, explains Josie Cohen from PAN UK. “But pesticides coming on to the market are so much more toxic than they used to be that we now need much less of a chemical to do the same job. That’s why using weight to compare pesticide use over time is utterly irrelevant and disingenuous. Pro-pesticide groups have access to the same data as us so why they keep relying on this statistic should be questioned.”

As an example, modern neonicotinoids are 10,000 times more potent than DDT, history’s most notorious insecticide which was banned in 2001 due to its impact on the environment.(2) One gram of neonicotinoids would be sufficient to kill 125 million honeybees, or roughly 12.5 metric tonnes of bees which is equivalent to the weight of 18 adult cows.(3)

Cohen added, “The agribusiness lobby continues to tout this oversimplified statistic which conceals the worrying rises we see in UK pesticide use. It’s an effective tactic because it gives politicians the impression that we’re moving in the right direction and therefore don’t need stronger standards to protect people and the environment from pesticides.”

In addition to the rise in toxicity, the data (which has been collated and analysed by PAN UK but is publically available) reveals a variety of other ways in which UK pesticide use is rising:

- In 1990, a hectare of agricultural land was, on average, treated with pesticides 2.5 times in a growing season. This had almost doubled by 2015 to 4.2 times. In the same time period, a hectare of UK potatoes went from being treated an average of 12.4 times to 32 times.(4)
- Between 1990 and 2016, the area of land treated with all pesticides rose by 63%, the area treated with fungicides by 69% and herbicides by 60%. (5)
- In the same time period, the percentage of cereals treated more than four times with pesticides in one growing season increased from 30% to 55%, oilseed rape went from 21% to 80% and potatoes from 83% to 95%.(6)
- Between 1974 and 2014, the average number of different pesticides applied to wheat increased by 12 times and to potatoes by 5.8 times. Between 1966 and 2015, the number of pesticides used to treat onions and leeks increased by 18 times.(7)

Polling conducted in 2017 revealed that 67% of people think that UK pesticide use should be reduced, and 78% agree that the government should provide more support to farmers using minimal or no pesticides.(8)

With Brexit looming, the UK is at a major crossroads in terms of its relationship to pesticides. While there is a danger the government could decide to weaken pesticide laws, Brexit could be a major opportunity to strengthen existing standards and drive a reduction in pesticide use which would mean less toxic chemicals in UK food, farms and urban spaces.

“We have a big decision to make”, said Cohen, “but it needs to be based on solid evidence which provides a clear picture of what’s happening on the ground. The agribusiness lobby’s repeated attempts to imply that pesticides are no longer a problem using a flawed metric are extremely unhelpful. The UK urgently needs to adopt a new system for meaningfully monitoring pesticide use. Without accurate data, it’s impossible to ensure that our regulatory system is fit-for-purpose and able to protect human health and environment from the toxic effects of pesticides.”

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NOTES TO EDITOR:

- (1) The full briefing ‘*The Hidden Rise of UK Pesticide Use: Fact-checking an Industry Claim*’ is available on the PAN UK website at www.pan-uk.org/pesticides-agriculture-uk.
- (2) An overview of the environmental risks posed by neonicotinoid insecticides, Dave Goulson, *Journal of Applied Ecology* 2013, page 1 - <https://www.sussex.ac.uk/webteam/gateway/file.php?name=goulson-2013-jae.pdf&site=411>.
- (3) Neonicotinoids and Bees; what is the fuss all about?, Professor Dave Goulson, 07/05/2013 - <http://splash.sussex.ac.uk/blog/for/dg229/by/tag/pesticide>.
- (4) Defra UK Farming Statistics, Table 2.1 Agricultural land use, 25/05/2017, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/629227/AUK-Chapter3-17jul17.ods; Pesticide Usage Survey Statistics (PUS STATS), Fera Science Ltd (Fera) on behalf of Defra, <https://secure.fera.defra.gov.uk/pusstats/>.
- (5) & (6) Pesticide Usage Survey Statistics (PUS STATS), Fera Science Ltd (Fera) on behalf of Defra, <https://secure.fera.defra.gov.uk/pusstats/>.
- (7) Data taken from presentation at Royal Society of Medicine conference, 20/11/2017, data purchased from Fera but not publically available.
- (8) Polling commissioned by PAN UK and SumOfUs and conducted by GQR Research, September 2017, <https://gqrr.app.box.com/s/0ddbifc853j9k1t1sbjvuc1crvxw8zbc>.