

FRENCH IMIDACLOPRID BAN UPDATE

French moratorium on the use of Imidacloprid and Fipronil Pesticides: 'Gaucho' (Bayer) and 'Regent' (BASF)

The Honey Harvest improves in several regions.

For the first time in a dozen years, the honey-harvest has improved in certain regions of France.

This was reported by the **National Union of French Apiculture** (UNAF), first union of the craft, which held its autumn conference in Nantes on Friday 7th and Saturday 8th October 2005.

President, **Henri Clement**, spoke of a *“net improvement of the stocks of bees”* and of *“strong and vigorous colonies”*. Mr Clement confirms that the honey-harvests have been very good in the South West of France.

The beekeepers' President saw in this momentary calm 'the reward' of their political struggle against the insecticides 'Gaucho' and 'Regent'. The active chemicals (Imidacloprid for 'Gaucho' and Fipronil for 'Regent') are accused by beekeepers of killing bees, affecting their behaviour and decimating apiaries. These insecticides, employed to protect crops against pests, have a systemic action: the insecticide is dusted onto the seeds and releases its active ingredients in the sap, nectar and pollen. "Since the ban, we have found that bee-colonies have regained the vigour they enjoyed before Imidacloprid and Fipronil were allowed" said Mr Clement.

A Test Year for French Beekeepers

2005 is a crucial year for beekeepers. For the first time, the two disputed insecticides have been banned from use on fields of maize, oilseed rape and sun-flowers. Their use has been progressively suspended as a result of victories won by beekeepers during a long legal battle. A government moratorium forbade the use of 'Gaucho' on sunflower seeds from 1999 and from 2004 on maize. The use of 'Regent' has been suspended on all crops since 2004.

In spite of the advances they have made, the beekeepers of UNAF are very far from claiming outright victory. "The poisoning of bees, the abnormal behaviour and the collapse in honey harvests that we saw between 1996 and 2004 have been reversed this summer in certain regions", explained Mr Clement. "We must now observe the over-wintering of colonies and the start of the Spring growth to document the deaths, or survival, of bees". In previous years, this mortality has killed-off between 30% and 50% of the stocks, according to honey producers.

However, the improvement in colony survival has not been consistent throughout France. The situation is "more variable", in Poitou-Charentes, in Pays de la Loire, in Vendee, according to UNAF.

Some beekeepers have failed to notice any improvement over earlier years. They may be suffering from the drought affecting these regions. However, according to the honey producers, the banned pesticides are still present in the soil of the fields. The long-term persistence of Imidacloprid and Fipronil in soils where the pesticides were freely used over a number of years, is the cause of continuing bee-losses even after the ban, according to beekeepers. In addition, 'Gaucho' is still allowed for use on cereal crops such as wheat, barley and oats. UNAF is demanding a total ban on the use of Gaucho for cereal crops.

This year is equally vital for the agrochemical companies. Bayer markets 'Gaucho' and BASF are the owner of 'Regent'. The industry denies any link between their products and the damage suffered by bees. "The theory that there is a sole explanation does not hold", states Jean-Marc Petat, director of the environment department at BASF. The Industry puts forward other hypotheses: the weather, lack of available food for the bees due to crop-monoculture, bee-diseases, bad practice on the part of the beekeeper. The pesticides incriminated in France are used in numerous other countries. "We would like an independent expert opinion, scientists need to resolve the matter" said Mr Petat. Since the start of this confrontation, the two camps have cited contradictory science studies. The ultimate fate of the currently-banned chemicals must be decided. The European Union, which is re-evaluating all the pesticides authorised in Europe, is asked to make a judgement. In parallel, a working group is charged, by the French Minister of Agriculture, to design scientific tests to determine the toxicity of Imidacloprid and Fipronil so as to arrive at a final decision.

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