



Date: 13th January 2009

Background – Pesticides vote

The EU is updating pesticides laws as part of the "Thematic Strategy for Pesticides". The strategy looks at how pesticides are approved and how they are used.

The most contentious aspect concerns the hazard-based approach being proposed. This would mean that any product that exceeds certain human health or environmental red flags will be banned.

Currently, products are assessed on the risks of actual exposure to an active ingredient rather than the active's inherent hazards. It means if the manufacturer can prove a product will be safe to use as directed it can be approved, even if the active ingredient might be hazardous. The new proposals mean the product is automatically not approved because it contains that hazard, regardless of whether it is dangerous when used as directed.

Although the UK Pesticides Safety Directorate and Cranfield University have conducted studies into the potential impact of these revised proposals in the UK, the European Commission has not conducted an EU-wide impact assessment. Conservative health spokesman, John Bowis, recently wrote to the commission demanding a full impact assessment be carried out before MEPs vote on the package.

The PSD has warned that up to 23 per cent of products will be lost in the UK. This could lead to a total loss of carrot yields, a 20 per cent fall in cereal yields and a significant drop in potatoes, onions, parsnips and other crops.

The Crop Protection Association has predicted that the proposals could cause the cost of food like potatoes, bread, pork chops and even a carton of milk to increase.

The European Parliament's environment committee voted to strengthen the proposals in November 2008, although a deal with the French Presidency in December which paved the way for agreement in Strasbourg this week did slightly water them down. This deal was essentially the 'common position' that MEPs passed on Tuesday and it represents a significant improvement on the

position agreed by MEPs at First reading - which would have taken around 85 per cent of products off the market.

Despite this, the proposals were so overzealous and precautionary that Conservatives once again attempted to reject them – with the support of Labour and some Lib Dem MEPs.

Conservative MEP Robert Sturdy also tabled three amendments on:

- 1) Definition of endocrine disruptors
- 2) The 'cut-off' criteria (point at which a product is removed)
- 3) Demanding a full EU-wide impact assessment

The final amendment was not voted on after being deemed inadmissible by the parliament's legal services – despite Conservative protestation.

The vote on whether or not to adopt the 'Common position' was passed with 577 MEPs in favour, 61 against and 11 abstentions. Both Conservative amendments fell.

Before the vote, in December, Robert Sturdy presented a letter to the Prime Minister at Downing Street, demanding the UK press for an impact assessment. At the same time, a petition signed by 72 scientists was delivered by Professor John Lucas, Head of the Plant Pathology and Microbiology Department at Rothamsted Research. It warned that a reduction in plant protection products could lead to pests developing resistances to the few products left.

When the matter was voted through the Council of Ministers, the UK government abstained. Hilary Benn – the Defra secretary of state – has said the UK government is opposed to the excessive approach now being taken, but many in the rural community believe the minister to be strong on language but soft on action. Conservatives are now calling on him to make a last-ditch effort in the Council of Ministers.

The products will also not be banned overnight as some are still covered by current authorisations ranging from 2010 to 2017. If no viable alternatives to existing products is available, it will be the responsibility of the British government to apply for derogations, and we will be watching to see if the British government gold-plates these plans in the coming years.