




Protecting pollinators from pesticides


Around € 3.7 billion of the EU's annual agricultural output is directly dependent on insect pollinators, but in recent decades the population of European wild-insect pollinators (bees, butterflies, hoverflies, and moths) has suffered significant declines. Modernising the way Europe's farms use pesticides will be a game changing solution to halt this negative trend.

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Europe's loss of wild-insect pollinators is attributed to a mix of factors including climate change, invasive alien species, habitat and land use changes, environmental pollution, and farm and garden-based pesticides. Pollinators can become exposed to toxins through contact with spray residues on plants or through ingestion of contaminated pollen and nectar. Contamination of nesting sites and nest materials also represent risks. According to the European Red List of endangered species, around one in three bee and butterfly species has a declining population, while around one in ten is threatened with extinction.

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An EU Pollinator Initiative has been responding to this situation since 2018 through combined efforts to coordinate legislation and improve knowledge about possible solutions. The Commission has worked to ensure that protection of pollinators is also taken into account in the plant protection product authorisation as required by the EU legislation on placing of the market of plant protection products. However, Action 7 of the Initiative focuses on pesticides and a recent review of its progress confirms that potentially harmful pesticides are still being authorised in Member States for emergency cases. This progress review also draws attention to EU goals to reduce overall use and risk of chemical pesticides as well as the use of more hazardous pesticides by 50% by 2030. The EU's Biodiversity and Farm to Fork strategies as well as CAP Strategic Plans (CSPs) are highlighted as key tools for such pollinator protection purposes.

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Alternative approaches to hazardous pesticides are promoted through integrated pest management (IPM) concepts and the new CAP fosters a framework for Member States to design CSP support to advance IPM approaches aligned with the EU Directive on Sustainable Use of Pesticides. CSP options for supporting eco schemes offer opportunities to upscale IPM through specific practices such as: mechanical weed control (giving preference to biological, physical and other non-chemical techniques to control pests and diseases); targeted and limited use of chemical plant protection products (where still necessary); increased use of resilient, pest-resistant crop varieties and species; and the use of buffer strips, fallow land and pollinators friendly cover crops. Such IPM practices are recognised for their potential to be pollinator and other beneficial insect-friendly.

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Good practices in IPM continue to be developed by Member States and could be applied through CSPs. Initiatives funded under both Horizon 2020 and LIFE are collating a critical mass of knowledge concerning effective IPM solutions for pollinators. Many of these examples could be further mainstreamed using new CAP interventions by farmers, producer organisations in the fruit and vegetable sector or Operational Groups, among others. Examples of IPM support for pollinators through the EAFRD can be found on the ENRD website. The EIP-AGRI website is another useful source of information about new approaches for protecting pollinators from pesticide risks.

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Valuable lessons have been learned by these EU-funded knowledge clusters. The new funding period for CAP, Horizon, LIFE, and other EU finance can further reinforce Member State's understanding of how to halt the decline in pollinators and help safeguard European food supplies, for a more resilient and sustainable agricultural sector.