

The authority that kicked the beehive

By Raymond Huber

Clothianidin has been linked to millions of bee deaths. So why is this highly toxic chemical approved for use on our food crops when it's banned in France, Italy and Germany? Recently the United States environmental authority was warned – by its own scientists – that clothianidin is 'major risk concern' to honey bees and other beneficial insects. It is a 'neonicotinoid' which means it's derived from that rascal nicotine. Clothianidin is an ingredient of the insecticide *Poncho* which is applied to many crop seeds in New Zealand; corn, wheat and animal feed for example. Clothianidin is not only a sticky word it's also a sticky chemical – it's so persistent it remains in plants right through to the pollen and nectar stage.

ERMA (Environmental Risk Management Authority) is responsible for 'controlling' the poisons sprayed on our crops. It is not planning to ban or even review the chemical despite the fragile state of our bee populations (feral and domestic). They say that they already 'manage' the use of it (they tend to be slow to ban chemicals if you recall the recent endosulfan episode). ERMA are into 'risk management' which are weasel words meaning 'we tell you the risk, but it's up to you to avoid it'.

Even if you're not worried about the bees, clothianidin is in your food. You can accept pesticide residues in your diet or you can eat organic, but while we have a choice to avoid clothianidin, the honey bees don't. Pesticide exposure is one of the most likely causes of the wave of bee deaths sweeping the world. Other causes are also a result of human activity: destruction of wild places, large crop farming (a poor diet for bees), and the spread of bee viruses and pests. New Zealand bee populations are already under pressure from varroa mites, so it's crazy to push them any further towards collapse by allowing highly toxic chemicals such as clothianidin to be used here.

It'd be wise to look after bees – about half of the world's important food crops

need bee pollination. Without honey bees, it'd be goodbye apples, cherries, strawberries, cocoa, almonds, soybeans etc. Honey bees have a finely tuned life and are very sensitive to changes in nature. The environment would collapse without pollinating insects and we need to take particular care with poisons. The Director of Genetics Otago, Peter Dearden, sums up the problem: *'Most insects in our environment are beneficial – they do important ecological jobs. Yet you can go into a supermarket and buy a spray can of broad-range poison that will kill all of them.'* It's time to look closely at our use of poisons, especially in crop production. Even if you don't go organic you can at least help bees by never spraying flowering plants and increasingly the diversity of plants in your garden. And it would be great if the authorities who are supposed to be protecting the environment would take the lead, instead of kicking the beehive.

Note: The Food Safety Authority (FSA) will not protect you from pesticide residues in your food. They function much the same way as ERMA does: by 'managing' the risks. They deal in 'acceptable levels' of compounds (ie. poisons). They state *'you can consume residues of many different compounds without any health effect'* providing the residues are below the acceptable levels.