Thematic strategy on the sustainable use of pesticides

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The European Parliament adopted a resolution based on the own-initiative report by Irena **BELOHORSKA** (NI, SK) in response to the Commission's communication on the "Thematic Strategy on the Sustainable Use of Pesticides". It acknowledged the need for a **European legal framework** in the field of pesticide use as legislation in force has not proved sufficient to achieve the prevention of the hazards and risks to health and environment posed by the use of pesticides.

Parliament pointed out that the use of plant protection products (PPPs) in the EU between 1992 and 2003 remained significant and has not decreased despite the proactive policies successfully pursued in some Member States to reduce the use of farm pesticides. Undesirable amounts of certain pesticides can still be found in the environment, in particular in soil and water; whereas residues exceeding regulatory limit values are still found in agricultural produce. It is important to adopt new legislation based on an approach more firmly centred on **reducing pesticide use** and more ambitious in terms of environmental performance, through the provision of proper support for organic farming and integrated production methods.

Members welcomed the Thematic Strategy on the Sustainable Use of Pesticides ('Thematic Strategy') but noted that it covers only PPPs, which constitute only a part of pesticides. The Commission should forthwith **include pest control products** (biocidal product types 14-19) as defined in Annex V to Directive 98/8/EC within the scope of the Thematic Strategy, as they pose similar risks to human health and the environment. The Commission was urged to extend the scope of the Thematic Strategy to include other biocides as soon as possible.

Parliament drew attention to the importance of a system of training and education for professional pesticide users, and recommended that the sale and distribution of pesticides be performed under the supervision of a qualified professional or practitioner, and that those transactions be recorded in a register to ensure adequate control of the marketing and use of such products.

Whilst the measures chosen by the Commission were welcomed, Parliament stressed that ambitious **National Action Plans** of the Member States are key elements in the whole process, and regretted that the Commission opted for the exclusion of quantitative and qualitative criteria in the National Action Plans, thus reducing their level of ambition. Without quantitative use reduction targets in the National Action Plans, the notion "reduction of hazards, risks and dependence on pesticides" is very imprecisely defined, and will not push Member States to lower the amount of pesticides used or to prioritise non-chemical alternatives for plant protection and pest and crop management. The Commission should combine the elimination of hazards, risks and dependence on pesticides with quantitative criteria in the National Action Plans, by stipulating that Member States must set their own national targets, timetables and criteria for reducing pesticide use. A commitment to curb the use of PPPs to make them less dangerous and to seek alternative plant protection products which are more environmentally friendly and less harmful to humans and animals will, in addition to environmental and public health benefits, improve the quality of European agricultural products and increase their added value as a result of widespread public awareness and consumer sensitivity regarding these issues.

Parliament went on to regret that, although pesticides are linked to immunological effects, endocrine-disrupting effects, neurotoxic disorders and cancer, **health** is only marginally mentioned in the Thematic Strategy. It emphasised that substances which are carcinogenic, mutagenic or toxic to reproduction, or

persistent, bio-accumulative or toxic, or which show endocrine disrupting properties, must not be approved as active substances in pesticides. Foetuses, infants, children as well as pregnant women, the elderly, the chronically sick and those with pre-existing medical problems, as well as users of pesticides and rural residents and communities, are more vulnerable and more exposed to pesticides, especially to cumulative effects of different types of pesticides, than the rest of the population. Parliament also called for immediate steps to be taken to ensure that sufficiently frequent checks are carried out on **imported goods** (which are generally subject to less strict legislation on the use of PPPs meaning that there is a higher risk of illegal residue levels) in all Member States.

Parliament believed that designation of zones, including drinking water catchment protection areas, with reduced or zero pesticide use and enhanced protection of the **aquatic environment** from pollution by pesticides are necessary in order to avoid unwanted exposure. "Buffer zones" of appropriate width taking account of the different agricultural, geographical and weather conditions should be established. Furthermore, the use of pesticides should be prohibited in and around urban residential areas, public parks, sports grounds, school grounds and children's playgrounds, as the Commission has recognised that the risks to the general public from exposure to pesticides in such areas are high. **Aerial praying** could only be used where it presents clear environmental advantages or where there are no viable alternatives, but that at the same time it should be obligatory to notify the general public about the time of spraying, the amounts and the type of pesticide.

The report called on the Commission to speed up **Community harmonisation of maximum residue levels**, which should be set as low as possible unless it can be proved that even the best techniques and methods available cannot prevent residue below a certain level. Member States were asked to improve the monitoring of pesticide concentrations in food products and environmental media.

Parliament welcomed the proposed invitation to Member States to eliminate provisions allowing Member States to apply reduced **VAT rates for pesticides**, and considered that the Commission should help Member States to introduce appropriate support measures for farmers, to be financed under rural development. It called on the Commission to support the Member States in setting up a system of taxes or levies in order to influence - quantitatively and qualitatively - pesticide use.

Members urged Member States to promote low pesticide-input farming and organic farming, and ensure that professional users of pesticides shift towards a more environment-friendly use of all available crop protection methods, giving priority to non-chemical methods of plant protection and pest and crop management, such as crop rotation and weeding. The Commission and Member States were asked to make adequate resources available for resistance **research**, for the cultivation and supply of a wide range of crops with various resistance characteristics, for research into crop rotation and soil cultivation methods to combat pests and plant diseases and for innovations in the area of plant protection, including non-chemical alternatives. Parliament stressed that global warming is likely to lead to increased pest populations which may increase the frequency and the intensity of outbreaks. Member States were also asked to ensure the safe storage and handling of pesticides.

Parliament urged the Commission to take into account the extremely worrying issue of mortality amongst domestic bees - a problem associated with the use of certain systemic insecticides (containing the active substances Fipronil and Imidacloprid) in order to treat sunflower and maize seeds.

Lastly, it stresses the need to amend European trading standards relating to the shape, size and aesthetic qualities of fresh fruit and vegetables, which encourage the intensive use of pesticides.