

Beekeepers Fume at Association's Endorsement of Fatal Insecticides

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Britain's beekeepers are at war over their association's endorsement for money of four insecticides, all of them fatal to bees, made by major chemical companies.

The British Beekeepers' Association has been selling its logo to four European pesticide producers and is believed to have received about £175,000 in return.

The active ingredient chemicals in the four pesticides the beekeepers endorsed are synthetic pyrethroids, which are among the most powerful of modern insect-killers.

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The deal was struck in secret by the beekeepers' association executive without the knowledge of the overwhelming majority of its members.

After news of the deal emerged, some members expressed outrage and others resigned.

The beekeepers have now said they will end their pesticide endorsements – but have left the door open to future deals with agrochemical companies.

The battling beekeepers will have a showdown this weekend at the National Beekeeping Centre at Stoneleigh in Warwickshire.

An open letter signed by prominent figures in the world of the environment and agriculture condemns the British Beekeepers' Association for its commercial relationship with the German chemicals giants Bayer and BASF, the Swiss-based Syngenta and the Belgian firm Belchim – and demands that it permanently sever commercial links with agrochemical companies.

“A charity that claims to have the interests of bees and beekeeping at heart should never put itself in a position where it is under the influence of corporations whose purpose is to sell insecticides which are able to kill bees,” said Philip Chandler, a Devon beekeeper and one of the organisers of the open letter, which has been signed by the botanist David Bellamy, the author and television wildlife presenter Chris Packham and Lord Melchett, policy director of the Soil Association, the organic farming body. “It is the equivalent of a

cancer research charity being controlled by a tobacco company," Mr Chandler added.

The beekeepers' executive, which effectively controls all the association's affairs, has thus far fended off attempts by its membership at getting the policy reversed.

The beekeepers' association's deal with the chemical companies had been running since 2001, and it received £17,500 a year for endorsing four pesticides: Bayer's Decis, BASF's Contest (also known as Fastac), Syngenta's Hallmark and Belchim's Fury.

The British Beekeepers' Association referred to the pesticides on several occasions in the newsletter BBKA News as "bee friendly" or "bee safe". Yet a 2003 study in the Bulletin of Insectology on modelling the acute toxicity of pesticides to honey bees found that cypermethrin, the active ingredient of Fury and Contest, and deltamethrin, the active ingredient of Decis, were in the top four most toxic to bees of all the 100 substances evaluated. Cypermethrin was second most toxic, and deltamethrin was fourth. (The active ingredient of Hallmark, lambda-cyhalothrin, was not included in the test.) Other studies confirm these conclusions.

Protests have mounted as the revelations came out. Such has been the anger of grass-roots beekeepers that the executive announced a strategic review of its links with "the plant protection industry", which concluded that endorsement and "related product specific payments" would cease "as soon as practically possible".

Yesterday the British Beekeepers' Association president, Martin Smith, confirmed the pesticide endorsements had finished, although he said there might still be some pesticide packaging in circulation bearing the BBKA logo. "We would expect that to be withdrawn within three months," he said.

Mr Smith said that the deals had been originally done as a means of developing good practice in relation to bees with the pesticides when they had been introduced, but that this aim had been achieved - so they were no longer necessary.

His announcement left the door open to future deals by insisting that "the trustees do not preclude accepting funds in the future from either the crop protection industry... or individual companies". Some beekeepers feel this is insufficient and want all links to be broken.

At this weekend's meeting a motion put down by the Twickenham and Thames Valley Beekeeping Association stipulates that "the BBKA cease any commercial relationships with agrochemical or associated companies, including all endorsement of pesticides".

One of the drafters of the motion, Kate Canning, said last night: "They're leaving the door open for future agro-chemical relationships. Our bees deserve better than this. It's time for a clean, green break."

The beekeepers executive is trying to head off the move by inserting its own motion ahead of the Twickenham and Thames Valley one, which asks delegates to support them in the way in which it "should manage its intellectual property". It goes on: "This includes the use of its logo and maximises the benefits which can be gained from these assets and its reputation."

Mr Smith said the logo would not be used on pesticides in the future.

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