

' Insecticides and Bees '

by Bernie Doeser

You may be unaware of the current debate raging in the beekeeping world about the British Beekeepers Association policy of endorsing four insecticides manufactured by Bayer, Syngenta, BASF and Belchim. In return for 17,500 pounds a year these companies are able to say that the BBKA endorses their products and they can use the BBKA logo.

Many people will find such a revelation difficult to believe or comprehend, after all the purpose of insecticides is to kill insects and aren't bees insects?

Bayer's spokesman is on record as saying that "the members are happy with the situation". This could not be further from the truth.

The policy was introduced without the members knowledge or approval in 2001. When members finally found out the details of the arrangement in 2005 Durham Beekeepers proposed a motion to reverse the policy at the annual delegates meeting with support of about a third of the membership. Since then there has been a running argument within the organisation between the members and the executive.

The BBKA executive have managed the debate by removing adverse member comments on the policy from their website, banning their authors from the site and preferring articles from agri-chemical businesses in their magazine to articles opposing the policy. All comment on the matter is now banned from the association magazine.

In 2009 the executive for the first time sought endorsement for the policy from the members and received support of 60% of the votes. Many delegates were unhappy that the decision had been taken by officer representatives without proper consultation with individual members. Another vote was called for in 2010 with similar results to 2009, and a further vote has been tabled for the 2011 Annual Delegates Meeting.

As a new member of the BBKA I was unaware of the arguments for the policy and decided to undertake some research in order to try to understand why this policy had been put in place. The reasoning behind the policy is this: by entering into an agreement with a few selected companies the BBKA could minimise the harm done to bees by ensuring that insecticides are properly applied.

This would be done by specifying good spraying practice in the instructions for use of these products and other documentation that farmers and spray contractors would be likely to read. All of this documentation is publicly available and I read it all. Sadly the user instructions do not incorporate the good practice guidelines agreed between the BBKA, NFU and CPA. Indeed Belchim's instructions positively contradict them. I contacted all the BBKA spray liaison officers in England to find out if local farmers were advising them of an intention to spray as required by the code of practice and only four had received more than one contact in the past 12 months. Bearing in mind that the four endorsed products are sprayed on over 3 million hectares annually this indicates that the code of practice is not being followed.

On a number of occasions the endorsed products have been referred to as "bee friendly" which is clearly absurd, and assertions that bees are repelled by the insecticides have been made.

Unsurprisingly most of the scientific evidence used to support the use of these products originates from the producers own laboratories.

More details about the claims and the evidence used are in a report available at <http://tinyurl.com/bbkapesticides> .

In conducting this research a number of worrying facts came to light, the two most serious being; that three of the four endorsed insecticides are in the "top five most toxic" in their class and secondly that Bayer was using the BBKA name to endorse Biscaya - a neo-nicotiniod - claimed to be the cause of massive bee deaths in Europe and a class of insecticide not endorsed by the BBKA.

In November events took a positive turn when the BBKA announced that it would withdraw from the endorsement programme as soon as is practically possible (see <http://tinyurl.com/2v7wgqb>).

The BBKA executive want to be able to enter into agreements with suppliers of other insecticides in the future as well as with insecticide trade organisations. As you can imagine many members are unhappy with this stance and so it will again be debated at the annual meeting in January.