

A law with unintended consequences

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New research suggests reducing the use of pesticide could have a huge impact on crop yields.

On paper, the European Commission's draft pesticides directive is admirable, in its intentions and in the careful and detailed inter-service consultations that preceded the draft.

But in the light of research not available when it was put to the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers, if implemented as it stands the directive will make nonsense of EU measures to mitigate climate change and dramatically worsen an already critical shortage of food worldwide.

The problem is set out in a UK pesticide safety directive study presented in June. It concluded that by severely reducing the number of pesticides, crop yields could fall by as much as 30%, with "no meaningful benefits" to human health.

The UK analysis is echoed by Nomisma, an Italian economic research institute, and the Humboldt University in Berlin, which in a study published in May concluded that even without the adverse effect of reducing pesticides, "both in the EU and globally, agricultural demand will grow faster than supply during...2003-05- 2013-15."

If production is to be maintained, large new areas would need to come under cultivation. Much of this is currently pasture and woodland.

But it is now well established that major losses of soil organic carbon, emitted as carbon dioxide (CO₂), are the result. And the figures are truly alarming.

A study by the UK-based Carlton Consultancy suggests that, in Europe alone, crop yield reductions of between 5%-30% can lead to emissions of 300 million to 3,000m tonnes of CO₂ over ten years. (Annual emissions in the EU27 are roughly 5,000m t/CO₂ each year with a reduction target of 20% of 1990 emissions by 2020.)

If the directive goes ahead unamended, the problem will soon be felt in terms of food supplies and of course prices; there is already little, if any, capacity to buffer short-term shortfalls in production. Moreover, the world population is expected to rise by 2.5 billion people by 2050.

If crop yields are reduced, increasing land under cultivation will be the only way to feed them. The consequence then will be significant greenhouse gas emissions that will undoubtedly reduce the impact of the EU's ongoing climate change mitigation initiatives.

And it is worth asking how urgent is the directive. The proposed 'hazard cut-off criteria' represents only an additional precautionary measure; there is no evidence that it is essential or even important. A robust pesticide authorisation system is already in place.

To be fair to the Commission, the new research data came up at a late stage. The impact assessment does not cover this crucial new dimension. But it is hard to see any good grounds for the Commission not, even at this late stage, to exert its right of initiative, withdraw the draft and think again. A sustainable, systemic community policy cannot avoid looking at all the connections and implications of policies.

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