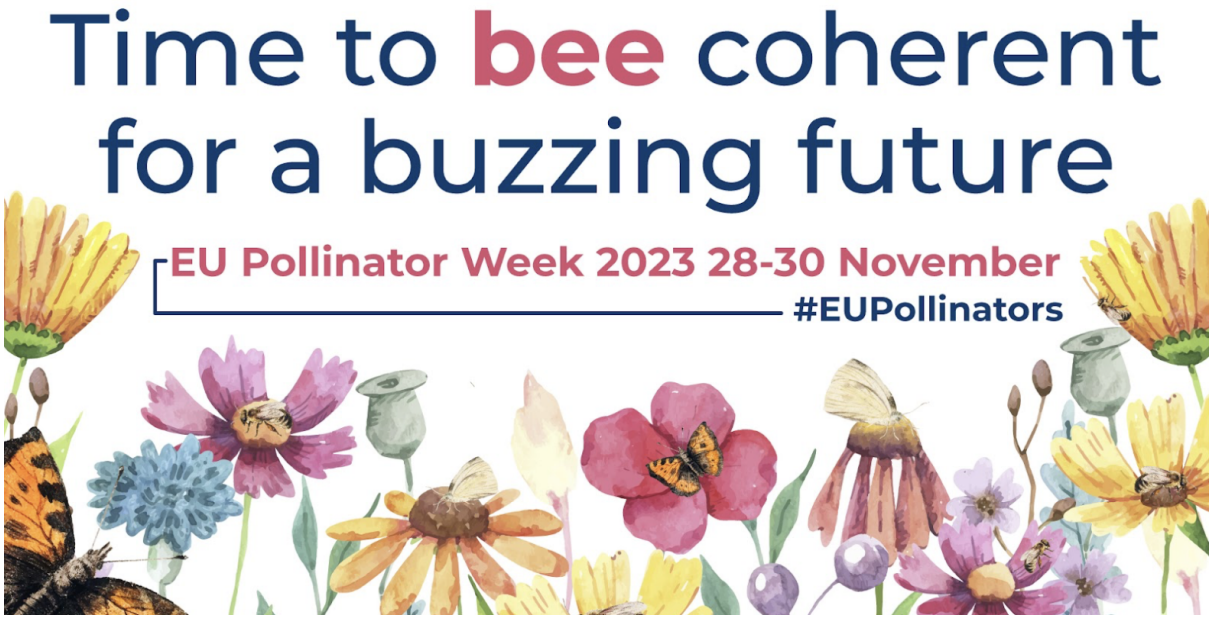

EU Pollinator Week - Highlights of Day 1
28 Nov 2023

For more information, access to the recordings and the slides, please visit
www.eupollinatorweek.com

(Recordings and slides will be available a few days after the event)

The European Pollinator Week kicked off on November 28 with a series of discussions on highly relevant political topics surrounding pollinators.

As was highlighted today by MEPs Juozas Olekas and Martin Hojsik, pollinators play a crucial role in safeguarding healthy ecosystems, our economy and our culture. Pollinators bring no less than 22 billion euros to our economy in Europe, pollinate two-thirds of our most important crops, and are an essential element in securing the regeneration of nature.

As presented in the scientific insights of Dr Johan Rockström, it became clear that the diverse crises we face today are interconnected. We must think holistically about pandemics, war, climate, and biodiversity challenges. We are facing skyrocketing species extinction risks, and extreme climate events are becoming more extreme and regular. We have witnessed three super El Niño events in the last 25 years, with 2023 being the hottest year ever recorded.

In response to the climate and biodiversity crisis, we have reached a point where we must not only protect but also become stewards, the protectors of nature and wildlife, to ensure that

environmental decline is halted and reversed. However, we can only help nature regenerate if we also support pollinators. Pollinators play a functional role without which ecosystems cannot thrive. Given the climate crisis we face, pollinators are our allies in helping nature to rebalance. Still, we need to ensure the indispensable climatic and environmental conditions they need so they can play their role.

Supporting pollinators is an essential component of nature restoration. Today we heard from experts that nature restoration comprises a vast series of measures to halt and reverse the decline in natural services and wildlife populations. A fundamental component of nature restoration is protecting pollinators, especially when we find alarming findings that jeopardise pollination services. In Europe, 10% of bee and butterfly species are at risk of extinction. In some instances, this means that the plants that depend on their pollination are also at risk.

Therefore, the Nature Restoration Law is a pivotal legislation to ensure that natural systems achieve sustainability. The legislative proposal aims to restore 20% of land and sea areas by 2030. However, this objective can only be met with ambitious and precise measures, including legally binding targets and clear and direct financing.

If the Nature Restoration Law truly seeks to achieve its objectives, it must reach the people in the field through discourse, training, and financial support. Without legally established financial aid for farmers, transition measures risk not only being unfair but downright unfeasible.

We must remember, however, that data and monitoring also play a fundamental part in restoration efforts. We need data to track environmental conditions and population trends of pollinators. These efforts are not only in the name of scientific knowledge but to fill the data gaps that affect our capacities to tailor and monitor the performance of public policies. Luckily, pollinators are also our allies regarding our need for data. Bees are excellent biomonitors, with evidence coming from research projects. Today, we had the opportunity to hear about the Beenet monitoring project in Italy, where levels of contamination from pesticide use have been tracked from wild bees and honeybees.

The Beenet project provides us once more with troubling findings. Researchers found that from all collected samples of bee bread across Italy, 70% had fungicides and 65% insecticides. Besides, of all found chemical substances, only 23% are not toxic to bees. However, the situation is even worse than it appears. Samples showed diverse contamination from different insecticides, pesticides and herbicides, thus elevating the risk of a cocktail effect, further endangering the health of pollinators. These results are troubling since there is no reason to think that Italian agriculture does not have exceptionally high contamination levels compared to other European countries. Thus, similar results may reasonably be expected in other contexts.

More problematically, let us remember that bees are excellent bioindicators, and the pesticide exposure they reveal means that risks extend beyond them. Other pollinators, wildlife and human health, are also at risk of pesticide contamination and its effects. The conclusions again point towards a need to reduce pesticide exposure in the environment.

However, reducing pesticide contamination levels has proven to be a significant challenge in Europe. The European Parliament recently rejected the Sustainable Use of Pesticides Regulation after it underwent a complicated negotiation process.

Representatives of the farming sector have also voiced today some of their concerns with the Sustainable Use Regulation, ensuring that they did not seek to undermine it or push it back. Their concerns were mainly about a lack of alternatives and various forms of uncertainty that the regulation could provide for food producers. In a lively response, it has been noted that ambitious targets established by the European Commission, such as the reduction of 50%, refer to pesticide use and risk. This means that withdrawing the most dangerous pesticides from the market ensures a giant leap towards reaching reduction targets.

Moreover, meeting ambitious reduction targets is an increasing priority not only for environmental protection but also because of matters of public interest. There is increasing citizen awareness about the chemical residues in their food, water, and environment. There are constantly new petitions, polls, and protests regarding pesticide contamination. These public voice acts are calls that politicians will need to hear. If they fail to do so and continue to do business as usual, major policies such as the Common Agricultural Policy may also face significant legitimacy and public support risks.

Finally, during today's session, other proposals on promising new opportunities for reduced pesticide use and food security were discussed. The last session on New Genomic Techniques and new forms of genetic modification brought opposing voices to the table. The European Commission proposed a new framework for the use of NGTs in Europe, mostly for new relaxed authorisation procedures for NGTs, in contrast to the ruling and more stringent norm on GMOs. The European Commission and the Spanish Presidency presented their position and positive view of NGTs. Their optimism is based on the expected pest and climate change resilience of NGT plants. Findings by the Joint Research Centre and the European Food Safety Authority further back such optimism.

However, optimism about NGTs is challenged by significant concerns of youth representatives and organic farmers. They both have insisted on the irreversible risks that unleashing NGTs into nature. Therefore, the precautionary principle should rule the decision-making process. At the same time, youth representatives insist on the intergenerational issues at stake and current generations' duty to ensure a healthy and uncompromised environment for future generations.

Furthermore, civil society representatives have also emphasised the lack of independent research on NGTs. The available evaluations by EFSA are not infallible. We have already

seen this with the devastating impact that neonicotinoids have had on bees, while these were also once deemed safe by public authorities. More importantly, we still need more rigorous criteria for NGTs. For example, the impact of plant modification on nectar production and flower form could significantly affect pollinators and pollination, and beekeepers expect more significant criteria. The discussion on NGTs will undoubtedly continue and, hopefully, it will seek further involvement by independent researchers and citizens.

The first day came to an end after a series of stimulating discussions and debate on pollinators and their role in agriculture and healthy ecosystems. Speakers, panellists and participants have explored significant political developments, including the Nature Restoration Law, the Sustainable Use of Pesticides Regulation, and the European Commission's proposal for new genomic techniques.

EU Pollinator Week Day 1 programme (Nov 28, 2023):

Mission of Democratic Belarus in Brussels (Arenbergstraat 1d, 1000, Brussels)

Opening Ceremony (Online)

Key-note speakers:

- MEP Juozas Olekas
- Vice-President European Parliament - Martin Hojsik
- Johan Rockström - Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research (PIK), Germany

High-Level Conference (Hybrid): "FUTURE FOR POLLINATORS: The Nature Restoration Law and pollinators"

Moderator: MEP Juozas Olekas, S&D, European Parliament
Key-note speakers:

- Facts behind the NRL - Denis Michez, UMons, Belgium
- Actions and Demands from the Young Generations - Fenja Kroos, Generation Climate Europe, EU

Debate: Is the NRL proposal fit for purpose to ensure a thriving future for pollinators and us?

- Nicolae Ștefănuță, Greens/EFA, European Parliament
- Niall Curley - Copa Cogeca
- Sabien Leemans - WWF

High-Level Conference (Hybrid): "FUTURE FOR POLLINATORS: The Sustainable Use of Pesticides Regulation and pollinators"

Moderators: Lars Hellander, President of BeeLife
Key-note speakers:

- Facts behind the SUR - Real-life data using Bees as indicators - Piotr Medrzycki, CREA-API, Italy
- Actions and Demands from the young generations - Julia Balasch, Global Youth Biodiversity Network

Debate: Is SUR proposal fit for purpose to ensure a thriving future for pollinators and us? What tools can be made available so it is?

- Anja Hazekamp - GUE/NGL, European Parliament
- Max Schulman - Copa-Cogeca
- Martin Dermine - PAN-Europe

High-Level Conference (Hybrid): "FUTURE FOR POLLINATORS: New Genetic Techniques, GMOS and pollinators"

Moderator: Benoit Biteau, Greens/EFA, European Parliament
Key-note speakers:

- Facts behind the NGTs and pollinators - Franziska Köller, Fachstelle Gentechnik und Umwelt, Germany
- Actions and Demands from the Young Generations - Sandrine Denaud, Global Youth Biodiversity Network
- Debate: Is the NGTs regulatory proposal fit for purpose to ensure a thriving future for pollinators and us?
    - Klaus Berend, DG SANTE, European Commission
    - Juozas Olekas, S&D, European Parliament
    - Miguel Angel Martín Esteban, Spanish Presidency
    - Eric Gall, IFOAM
    - Noa Simón Delso, BeeLife