# OPERA Research Center, a front group for the pesticide industry in the bee debate

Corporate Europe Observatory and European Beekeeping Coordination (Beelife) - December 2013

Bees and other pollinating insects, playing a crucial role in biodiversity and agriculture, are under threat. Bee colonies decline has been increasing in Europe. Neonicotinoids, a group of widely-used insecticides are accused of being one of the main culprits. Neonicotinoids are a class of 'systemic' insecticides, chemicals that are easily absorbed by and transported throughout the plant. They show high acute and chronic toxicity to honeybees. Scientific evidence of the effects of neonicotinoid pesticides on bees has been highlighted over the last decade.

The pesticide industry does everything it can to defend its business and fend off any action taken against their products. One strategy for this is to support and fund academic institutions that may have more credibility than they do to support industry-friendly positions. A second is to infiltrate regulatory agencies as the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA). Syngenta found a suitable target for both: the OPERA Research Center is part of the largest private university in Europe (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore), based in its satellite campus in Piacenza, Italy. But OPERA also has a lobby office in Brussels.

Many of OPERA's activities and reports are done jointly with the pesticide industry, notably Syngenta. It's 2011 report "Bee Health in Europe" echoes industry positions that pesticides are not one of the main causes of bee decline. Contributors to the report include people from corporations like Dow Agrosciences, Syngenta, Bayer and BASF. Another contributor, who then worked at the UK Food and Environment Research Agency (FERA) recently went through the revolving doors to Syngenta.[1]

## Neonicotinoids and bee colony collapse – the EU takes some action

'Neonics' are a lucrative business. They are said by the industry to be a 'unique success' in terms of profits, reaching a 24 per cent market share of all insecticides (by sales revenue) in 2008 after the first commercialisation in the early nineties.[2] Worldwide, the neonicotinoids imidacloprid (originally manufactured by Bayer but now off patent,

[1] Carrington D. *Government bee scientist behind controversial study joins pesticide firm.* The Guardian. 26 July 2013. http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2013/jul/26/government-bee-scientist-pesticide-firm

with the trade names Admire® and Gaucho®) and thiametoxam (produced by Syngenta and still covered by a patent, with trade names including Actara® and Cruiser®) are used on at least 140 and 115 different crops respectively, including fruits, vegetables, cereals and potatoes.[3]

Warnings that the increased use of neonics is related to the sudden collapse of many bee colonies have intensified over the years, increasingly backed up by scientific evidence. A report published in 2012 by the European Parliament compiled this evidence, concluding that the precautionary principle should be applied when using neonicotinoids.[4] The second "Late Lessons Early Warnings" report by the European Environment Agency (EEA) dedicated a chapter on the story of the link between Bayer's insecticide Gaucho® and the sudden frequent collapse of bee colonies in France.[5]

In March 2012 the European Commission mandated the EFSA to deliver a scientific opinion on the issue. Italy had already suspended the marketing of maize seeds treated with neonicotinoids. Slovenia, Germany and France followed, with the French government announcing its intention to withdraw the registration of thiamethoxam. A furious lobbying campaign by the pesticides industry followed, targeting EFSA and the Commission: CEO documented the messages used and the industry's tactics for this campaign in April 2013.[6]

The EFSA working group of external experts concluded that acute risks could be identified as regards bees' exposure to neonicotinoids in crops like oilseed rape, maize and sunflowers.[7] This triggered aggressive messages from Syngenta, threatening EFSA with legal action if it went ahead with publishing this message.[8]

By the end of May 2013, however, the European Commission decided to suspend the authorisation for three of the most popular neonicotinoids: clothianidin (Bayer), imidacloprid and thiametoxam (both Syngenta).[9] In August, Bayer and Syngenta responded by challenging the European Commission's ban at the European Court of Justice.[10]

The deep public concern about bees and pollinators, which are emblematic for a sustainable agriculture and ecosystem, is a great worry for the industry. Their strategy therefore has been multi-pronged, including the mobilisation of other, more 'objective' voices to claim that it is not pesticides but other factors which are the main problem for bees. One such 'objective voice' is the OPERA Research Center, an institute at an Italian university. But is it such an objective voice? As we will show in this article, OPERA has strong links with the pesticide industry and functions as one of their lobby front groups in Brussels. Worryingly, the director of OPERA sits on the pesticides panel of EFSA.

---

[2] Jeschke et al. Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry. 2011, 59. http://www.moraybeedinosaurs.co.uk/neonicotinoid/global.pdf

[3] *idem.*

[4] European Parliament. *Existing Scientific Evidence of the Effects of Neonicotinoid Pesticides on Bees.* 2012. http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/note/join/2012/492465/IPOL-ENVI_NT%282012%29492465_EN.pdf

**Industry's lobby campaign to safeguard pesticides sales**

Industry has tried to counter growing public concern about bee population decline by promoting the message that it is not pesticides (in particular neonicotinoids) which are to blame, but other causes instead such as diseases (parasites and viruses), bad beekeeping practices or a lack of food (due to lack of biodiversity in the countryside) .

To get this message across, the industry has implemented an array of tools. Syngenta and Bayer were able to infiltrate expert working groups advising the EU on pesticides and bee health[11] which consequently concluded, for instance, that long term bee health risk assessment is not needed. BASF helped set up a front group called the 'Bees Biodiversity Network', that co-hosted a high profile conference in 2012 in the European Parliament. Syngenta runs a project called "Operation Pollinator" to the concept of promote growing margins of flowers around farmers' fields, to create a "positive public perception" that "commercial farming and positive environmental management can coexist".[12]

In April 2013 CEO published a detailed account of Syngenta's lobby campaign in the run up to EFSA's report on bees and pesticides, and of its aggressive attack on the agency when it was published, based on a letter exchange between the company and EFSA and the European Commission, obtained through an access to document request.[13]
Apparently Syngenta, having had access to EFSA's press release on the report before its publication, immediately sent an extremely aggressive letter to the agency, threatening it with legal action: ".. we ask you to formally confirm that you will rectify the press release by 11 o'clock. Otherwise you will appreciate that we will consider our legal options."

---

[5] European Environment Agency. Late lessons from Early warnings Volume II. Chapter 16. Published 22 January 2013. http://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/late-lessons-2/late-lessons-chapters/late-lessons-ii-chapter-16

[6] Corporate Europe Observatory. *Pesticides against Pollinators.* April 2013. http://corporateeurope.org/agribusiness/2013/04/pesticides-against-pollinators

[7] EFSA press release. 16 January 2013. http://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/press/news/130116.htm

[8] Corporate Europe Observatory. *Pesticides against Pollinators.* April 2013. http://corporateeurope.org/agribusiness/2013/04/pesticides-against-pollinators

[9] EFSA press release. 16 January 2013. http://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/press/news/130116.htm

[10] European Voice. *Syngenta, Bayer challenge EU pesticide ban.* 27 August 2013. http://www.europeanvoice.com/article/2013/august/syngenta-challenges-eu-pesticide-ban/78075.aspx

[11] Corporate Europe Observatory and Beelife. *In whose hands is the future of our bees?* November 2010. http://corporateeurope.org/news/whose-hands-future-bees

[12] Syngenta. Operation Pollinator 4-pager. January 2013. http://www.operationpollinator.com/resources/documents/Operation%20pollinator%204pger_24-01-13.pdf

[13] Corporate Europe Observatory. *Pesticides against Pollinators.* April 2013. http://corporateeurope.org/agribusiness/2013/04/pesticides-against-pollinators

**OPERA Research Center: university institute or Brussels lobbying outfit?**

OPERA claims to provide “high quality information” and “simple pragmatic solutions” to EU and national decision-makers on food and agriculture issues, and a “transparent platform to debate the right approaches for sustainable, intensive agriculture”.[14] OPERA says it works with a virtuous circle dynamic, offering a platform to “identify topical issues” in agriculture, using a “comprehensive network” of expertise to provide solutions and disseminating these solutions to “policy-makers and stakeholders”. Stated key topics are the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) reform and pesticides.

OPERA’s activities to influence EU policy-makers are run by its lobby office in Brussels with five staff members. The lobby office was opened soon after its first activity in 2009. OPERA is registered in the EU's voluntary lobby register. In the register OPERA declares a total budget over 2012 of €625,000, of which €50,000 was donated by private companies. But despite claims of transparency, the exact origin of its funding is not disclosed. OPERA’s own website states that 90 per cent of its funding comes from public collaborations[15], but their overall budget, and specific funding sources are not disclosed.

Industry involvement in OPERA is not just financial, though. Representatives from Dow, Bayer and Syngenta sit on the OPERA scientific committee[16]. This is not immediately clear, since the website only provides the names of the members and not their backgrounds. The scientific committee is responsible for, among other things, ensuring the “transparency and independence of the research activity”. The OPERA website does not make the names of members of its management team or its expert groups readily available.

A more detailed look at OPERA’s activities shows that most of them are organised in cooperation with key industry and lobby actors. In particular, ties with Syngenta seem very close, as seen in OPERA’s newsletters. Leaflets are produced together with Syngenta about how the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) can be “greened through industry partnerships”[17]; OPERA published “guidelines for a sustainable use of pesticides” developed with Syngenta[18]; reported on workshops about “climate compatible agriculture” organised by Syngenta[19]; and runs industry funded projects like ‘Drink with Trust’ (Bevisicuro), with private water companies like Suez, but also funded by Dow and again, Syngenta[20]. OPERA is a strong advocate of a concept called “Sustainable Intensification of Agriculture” (SIA) which is also heavily pushed by the agro-food

[14] OPERA Research Center website. Accessed November 2013.http://operaresearch.eu/en/content/What-OPERA-is.9/

[15] idem.

[16] Representatives of Dow AgroSciences (Anne Alix, also contributor to the expert groups advising on bee health), Bayer Cropscience (Alain Dini), Syngenta (Romano de Vivo) and COPA-COGECA (Pasquale di Rubbo, big farmer's lobby)

[17] OPERA, Syngenta and the European Landowners Association. Greening in Best Practice http://www.europeanlandowners.org/files/pdf/2012/GREENING_DEPLIANT_10.pdf

[18] OPERA newsletter nº 6, Summer 2011. Page 5 http://operaresearch.eu/files/repository/20111010144430_newslettersummer2011_OK.pdf

[19] OPERA newsletter nº 6, Summer 2011, page 9 http://operaresearch.eu/files/repository/20111010144430_newslettersummer2011_OK.pdf

[20] OPERA newsletter nº 6, Summer 2011 http://operaresearch.eu/files/repository/20111010144430_newslettersummer2011_OK.pdf

industry[21]. One of its projects is called the SIA network, launched at Syngenta's 2012 'Forum for the future of agriculture', a major agriculture policy event held every year in Brussels. Syngenta, perhaps unsurprisingly, is one of the main promoters of the idea of the 'sustainable intensification of agriculture'[22]. But again, neither the members nor the governing bodies of the SIA network are revealed on the OPERA website.[23]

**OPERA echoing industry line on pesticides and bees**

OPERA has been particularly involved in the debate on pesticides and bees, by publishing and promoting its 2011 report "Bee health in Europe". The report seeks to shift the focus from pesticides by pinning the blame for dwindling bee numbers on a "wide range of factors", just like the industry does. The technical contributors included Dow Agrosciences, Syngenta, the industry lobby group European Seed Association (ESA), Bayer and BASF. Among the scientific contributors were the head of the university department which runs Syngenta's Operation Pollinator, Dr Kyriaki Machera, and Helen Thompson who went through the revolving door from leading the Environmental Risk Team at the UK Food and Environment Research Agency to... Syngenta.[24]

The OPERA report refers precisely to the working groups in institutions that were shown to have strong conflicts of interest with the pesticide industry, such as the ICPPR (International Commission for Pollinator-Plant Relationships).[25] Updates of the report, reiterating the same conclusions, have been published since, the latest in January 2013.

When it comes to pesticides, in its report OPERA says it is nearly all about bad management by farmers and beekeepers: "..the most frequent causes of adverse effects of pesticides to bees are the misuse of products and / or ignorance of product label statements by farmers, combined with a poor communication with beekeepers, or disregard by the latter for good beekeeping practices."[26] This echoes exactly Bayer and Syngenta's line such as ".. neonicotinoid-based pesticides can be fatal, but only when mistakenly misused by farmers, or as a result of a rare failure by them properly to follow clear product use recommendations"[27] [28]. As a consequence, the recommendations focus

---

[21] Friends of the Earth International. *A Wolf in Sheep Clothing - An analysis of the 'sustainable intensification' of agriculture.* October 2012. http://www.foei.org/en/resources/publications/pdfs/2012/a-wolf-in-sheep2019s-clothing-an-analysis-of-the-2018sustainable-intensification2019-of-agriculture

[22] SCI website. Accessed November 2013.http://www.soci.org/News/Bioresources/Bioresources-Sustainable-Intensification-Past-Conference-Papers

[23] OPERA Research Center website. Accessed November 2013. http://operaresearch.eu/files/repository/20120329133450_SIANetwork.pdf

[24] European Beekeeping Coordination. *Doors keep revolving - government bee scientist joins pesticide industry.* August 2013. http://bee-life.eu/en/article/47/

[25] See for detailed story: Corporate Europe Observatory and Beelife. *In whose hands is the future of our bees?* November 2010. http://corporateeurope.org/news/whose-hands-future-bees

[26] OPERA Research Center. *Bee Health in Europe – Facts & Figures.* January 2013. Page 37 http://operaresearch.eu/files/repository/20130122162456_BEEHEALTHINEUROPE-Facts&Figures2013.pdf

[27] Syngenta website. Accessed November 2013. http://www.syngenta.com/eame/plightofthebees/en/causes/Pages/causes.aspx

[28] Bayer's "Beecare" website. Accessed November 2013.

on more research, on education for farmers and beekeepers and on ‘mitigation measures’. The latter could mean even more profits for the same corporations. Bayer, for instance, proposes its air-cleaning technology SweepAir, which supposedly reduces dust emissions from sowing machines, but obviously not reducing the pesticide-coating that seeds are treated with.

Another argument to undermine the focus on pesticides is to say that “few countries have reliable data and it is hard to quantify losses properly. Surveillance systems vary so much that data cannot be compared in any meaningful way.” Typically also, the report focuses on acute effects, not on chronic toxicity and sub-lethal effects. The acute effects can happen when direct spraying takes place. But neonics are very often applied as seed coating, in which case the insects are chronically exposed to small doses. In this case, it’s not the farmer that can make ‘mistakes’. The report however states that "a sub-lethal effect is not necessarily an adverse effect, unless the contrary is shown by appropriate evidence. There does not appear to be any strong evidence that sub-lethal effects of pesticides play a key role as a causative factor behind bee colony mortality.”

In his role as OPERA’s director, Ettore Capri is actively lobbying EU decision-makers on the issue of bees and pesticides, and this activity favours the pesticide industry. For instance, he was on the programme as a speaker at a high profile event[29] in June 2012 in the European Parliament organised by a BASF front group[30] called the ‘Bees and Biodiversity Network’, hosted by conservative MEP Gaston Franco. In February 2013 Mr Capri again had the opportunity to put forward the OPERA bee report's conclusions in the European Parliament, at an event of the Intergroup on Climate Change, Biodiversity and Sustainable Development.[31] Beekeepers who were in the room at that moment were upset. In their experience, the rising use of neonics really did make a difference in bee decline, but instead Mr Capri put the blame on them, they felt.[32] The following month, Capri wrote an opinion piece in The Parliament magazine[33] : “The scientific truth remains that, despite the increasing political pressure and the recent spike in research regarding the link between bee health and correctly used pesticides, no direct conclusive link has yet been established”.

**OPERA and EFSA: too close for comfort**

Despite OPERA’s numerous links with the pesticides industry, its director Ettore Capri sits on EFSA's pesticides panel, contributing directly to official EU opinions on the safety of pesticides. While Capri was not part of EFSA’s specific working group on bees and pesticides, as a member of the pesticides panel (from 2009-2012 and 2012-onwards) he has been involved in many discussions on Syngenta's and other companies' products. In CEO's view, this represents a direct conflict of interest.

---

http://beecare.bayer.com/agriculture/neonicotinoids

[29] Website Gaston Franco MEP. Accessed November 2013. http://www.gaston-franco.eu/IMG/pdf/Programme_Conference_June_2012.pdf

[30] Corporate Europe Observatory. *A trojan ... bee?* June 2012. http://corporateeurope.org/news/trojan-bee-front-group-basf-co-organise-event-parliament-bees-and-biodiversity

[31] EBCD website. Accessed November 2013. http://www.ebcd.org/en/EP_Intergroup_CCBSD/Agriculture/Bee_Health_in_Europe.html

[32] VILT. *Rapport over bijensterfte zet kwaad bloed bij imkers.* 26 February 2013. http://www.vilt.be/Rapport_over_bijensterfte_zet_kwaad_bloed_bij_imkers

However, EFSA, contacted by journalist David Cronin[34], denied that Capri had conflicting interests because of this dual role. The reason given: OPERA (or in fact, the university that it is part of) is on EFSA's list of “food safety organisations” that, by definition, pursue “public interest objectives”. But in fact, this list of organisations presents a major loophole in EFSA’s independence policy.

A food safety organisation, according to EFSA, is an organisation that is considered “to carry out tasks within EFSA’s mission, that pursues public interest objectives and whose governance ensures the performance of its tasks with independence and integrity”. This reflects the official criteria for 'food safety organisations' laid out in EU law.[35] Precisely because these organisations are considered to be independent and pursuing public interest objectives, they enjoy a much more relaxed conflict of interest regime than other organisations or companies. Besides, these organisations can get involved in EFSA's work by participating in grants and procurement activities.[36]

The organisations on this list[37] are mostly academic and government institutes. EFSA told CEO that the list is compiled through nominations by member states that each apply its own criteria, plus a list of food research institutes drawn up by the European Commission (DG Budget), listing organisations with more than 50 per cent public funding. In general, however, many academic and government institutes have become (partly) privatised or do consultancy work for industry. It is difficult to see how it can be taken for granted that they pursue purely public interests.

EFSA has started a review of the Article 36 list in 2012, and it is one of their focal points for 2013 as well. However, given the fact that OPERA Research Center as part of the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore remains on the list, is not clear at all how EFSA has judged whether organisations pursue 'public interest objectives' or not. The close ties between OPERA and the pesticide industry, for instance, would have been hard to miss. But as was acknowledged by EFSA's executive director Bernhard Url[38], EFSA has both the responsibility and the power to revisit and change this list, closing an important loophole in its rules on conflicts of interest.

Mr Capri has other conflicts of interest as well, as is shown in CEO's report "Unhappy Meal"[39], including for instance involvement in the Society of Environmental Toxicology and Chemistry (SETAC) sponsored by companies including ExxonMobil and 3M. SETAC global is affiliated with ILSI's Health and Environmental Sciences Institute (HESI). ILSI

---

[33] Capri, Ettore, in: TheParliament.com. 15 March 2013. http://www.theparliament.com/latest-news/article/newsarticle/bee-mortality-ettore-capri/#.Un0TCxyHf74

[34] Cronin, D. NewEurope online. *Ban bee killers doesn't end EU's bias towards pesticides.* 09 June 2013. http://www.neurope.eu/article/ban-bee-killers-doesn-t-end-eu-s-bias-towards-pesticides

[35] Commission Regulation (EC) 2230/2004

[36] EFSA website. Accessed November 2013. http://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/supporting/doc/437e.pdf

[37] EFSA website. Accessed November 2013. http://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/scdocs/doc/art36listg.pdf

[38] Personal communication. 14 November 2013.

[39] Corporate Europe Observatory. *Unhappy Meal.* October 2013. Attached file no. 10. http://corporateeurope.org/sites/default/files/attachments/10-ppr_plant_protection_products_and_their_residues_2012-2015.pdf

(International Life Sciences Institute) is a lobby group funded by many food and biotech companies[40].

**Conclusion**

The OPERA Research Center, while being part of an Italian university, has close links and gets funding from agrochemical companies like Syngenta. It has been set up for the purpose to provide ‘science-based, pragmatic solutions' to policy makers on agriculture issues, and disposes of a fully staffed lobby office in Brussels to increase its impact. Its activities and messages on bees and pesticides are developed jointly with the pesticide industry, and therefore echo the industry's arguments.

OPERA’s director Ettore Capri sits on EFSA's pesticides panel. EFSA's current rules on conflicts of interest allows for this situation to exist, because the university that OPERA belongs to is part of their list of 'food safety organisations' – organisations that are supposed to be pursuing the public interest only. This presents a major – but certainly not the only – flaw in EFSA's independence policy. EFSA has the power and responsibility to tackle this problem by scrutinising the list, and by establishing much stricter criteria to define what are 'food safety organisations'. As a consequence, since Mr Capri has a big conflict of interest, he should be removed from the EFSA pesticides panel.

[40] Corporate Europe Observatory. *The International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI), a corporate lobby group.* May 2012. http://corporateeurope.org/sites/default/files/ilsi-article-final.pdf