



Victoria Prentis MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Seacole Building
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

Wednesday 2nd December 2020

Dear Victoria,

Neonicotinoid Seed Treatment for the 2021 Sugar Beet Crop

I am writing in relation to the formal application that has been jointly submitted to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) by British Sugar and NFU Sugar – for emergency authorisation of the neonicotinoid seed treatment ‘Cruiser SB’.

As you know, I have a longstanding connection with, and interest in, agricultural policy – through my career before Parliament (as a former Director of Elsoms Seeds and onetime policy adviser at the NFU), as Chair of the APPG for Agricultural Science and Technology and in initiating the UK AgriTech Industrial Strategy when Minister for Life Science. My Mid Norfolk constituency is heavily agricultural and sugar beet is one of our major sectors.

Having visited local growers in Mid Norfolk this year and engaged in various conversations with both British Sugar and NFU Sugar in recent months, I am acutely aware that our sugar beet industry is facing enormous challenges currently.

I have seen first-hand the horrendous impact of the Virus Yellow disease (in its worst epidemic since the 1970s this year) on local crops, and understand that 40% of the national crop has been affected – with yields down by approximately a quarter on the five-year average, and by even more in many of the worst affected regions.

The scale of the problem in Norfolk has been shocking to see and the forecasts paint an even bleaker picture for the prospects of sugar beet crops going forward. Last year’s mild winter, which allowed unprecedented numbers of aphids to survive, is undoubtedly the main cause – and when this crisis is looked at in the context of the other huge challenges the sugar beet industry is facing (such as the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic), it is clear to see why there is so much concern about the sector’s future.

Having spoken with industry experts and local growers, I have been left in no doubt that steps need to be taken now to protect the next year’s crop if we are to avoid a potentially catastrophic impact on this industry – and therefore support the formal application by British Sugar and NFU Sugar for emergency authorisation to use Cruiser SB.

Of course, as someone committed to our agricultural sector, the importance of environmental and wildlife protection must not be forgotten. However, having been fully briefed on the clear programmes of work in place to develop disease resistant varieties and explore more innovative approaches to protecting crops, it is

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evident that these solutions will not be ready in the next three years. Cruiser SB must be deployed in this present crisis.

I have also been assured that the application submitted is for a limited period to cover just the 2021 crop and would only allow a controlled use of Cruiser SB. Furthermore, the neonicotinoid would only be used IF the Virus Yellows forecast exceeded the risk threshold.

I believe that HSE considered the joint application at the end of November and that the recommendation now lies with yourself as the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State.

Having spoken with representatives of British Sugar again this week, it is clear that they are desperate for a timely decision. Should a derogation be granted, the industry needs time to be able to order the treatment and be ready to apply it to the seed, if required, in adequate time for the seed to be sowed in the early spring.

(I note that several EU states granted such derogations for neonicotinoid treatments this past year – with five having already granted derogations for 2021 and an additional ten in the processing of doing so. If we are to ensure that our British sugar beet industry can compete as we exit the European Union, we must support them through this crisis)

Please may I encourage you to back this application and issue a derogation by, at the latest, the middle of this month.

Yours,

George Freeman MP

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8 Damgate Street, Wymondham, NR18 0BQ