

Petition Seeks Nationwide Refuge Ban of GE Crops and Neonicotinoid Pesticides

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Washington, DC--(ENEWSPF)--February 27, 2014. Beyond Pesticides joined Center for Food Safety (CFS), Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER), and Center for Biological Diversity earlier this week in filing a formal petition for rulemaking with the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI). The petition demands that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), the DOI bureau tasked with managing and regulating the system of National Wildlife Refuges (NWRs) across this country, establish better protections for wildlife and their habitat by prohibiting the use of genetically engineered (GE) crops and neonicotinoid pesticides in NWRs as well as other necessary policy changes.

The petition asserts that the allowed cultivation of GE crops and use of neonicotinoid pesticides on lands designated as NWRs violates not only the purpose and protective standards of the National Wildlife Refuge Act (NWRA), which seeks

to conserve, manage and restore fish wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats for the present and future generations, but also threatens endangered species by resulting in destruction of critical habitat protected under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

Specifically, pollen from GE crops drift and contaminate related wild plants and natural crops. There is also the problem that GE crops are overwhelmingly engineered for one function -to be resistant to pesticides. Accordingly, application of pesticides goes hand-in-hand with GE crops, which have been shown to dramatically increase pesticide release into the environment, including wildlife refuges. Massive pesticide exposure from pesticide-promoting GE crops has also caused weeds to mutate, creating an epidemic of herbicide-resistant “superweeds.”

Neonicotinoids, a relatively new class of pesticides, are often applied as a coating to agricultural seeds that results in the chemical moving through the plants vascular system and expressing itself in nectar, pollen, and guttation droplets. Severely damaging to pollinators, studies have found that honey bees are particularly at risk if exposed to neonicotinoid pesticides at high concentrations and sublethal doses. Widespread pollinator loss threatens native plants and the species that rely on them for survival, as well as our nation’s food supply. Over 80% of flowering plants rely on pollination services from these critical species.

To remedy the legal violations and better protect the environment and wildlife dependent on NWRs from the dangers posed by GE crops and neonicotinoids, the peti-

tioners request that FWS take several actions. First and foremost, the petition asks FWS to issue a rule that bans the planting of GE crops and use of neonicotinoids on NWRs. Second, the petitioners request that as a part of the rule, amend existing regulations to exclude GE crops and neonicotinoids as compatible uses. In carrying out this action, the petition asks FWS to include specific instructions and deadlines for expeditiously phasing out such practices where they exist. Concerning the ESA, the petitioners request that FWS take specific actions in order to comply with the mandates of ESA and reassess endangered species impacts. Lastly, the petition requests that FWS monitor and report on GE crops, pesticide use, and GE volunteers, so that the public is informed about farming practices on refuge lands.

As one of the petitioners notes, “According to federal policy, GE crops are forbidden unless their use is essential to accomplishing refuge purposes. The fact that refuges in the Northeast and Southeast have stopped using GE crops without any ill effects belies the notion that they are ever ‘essential’ for managing wildlife refuges,” said PEER executive director Jeff Ruch.

Confounding as it may be that GE crops (or any agricultural practices for that matter) as well as pesticide use has been permitted on NWRs, the fact remains that these practices have proceeded without consideration for the essential purpose of NWRs and the increasingly important role they must play in carving out a protective space in which native plants and wildlife can find reprieve from the ever-expanding modern-day assaults to the environment. The petitioners assert that use of GE

crops and neonicotinoids on areas specifically set aside for conservation and wildlife protection, just doesn’t make sense.

“Permitting GE crops and neonicotinoid pesticides in Natural Wildlife Refuges threatens one of the few places that pollinators should be able to find shelter from the onslaught of toxic poisons threatening their existence and all that depend on them,” said Jay Feldman, executive director for Beyond Pesticides.

“National Wildlife Refuges are vital sanctuaries of our natural heritage, for present and future generations. Allowing chemical companies to profit by poisoning these important ecosystems violates their fundamental purpose and mission,” said Andrew Kimbrell, executive director for Center for Food Safety.

“Pesticides and genetically engineered crops are not part of America’s precious natural heritage,” said Jonathan Evans toxics and endangered species campaign director for the Center for Biological Diversity. “National wildlife refuges were founded to be sanctuaries for America’s wildlife and not laboratories for agricultural experiments.”

The filing of the petition is one of many efforts on the part of Beyond Pesticides, Center for Food Safety, and other allies to stop not only FWS from permitting the growing of GE crops on numerous National Wildlife Refuges across the country, but to stop the unchecked use of these environmentally damaging and wildlife threatening practices. Beyond Pesticides will continue the fight against the dangerous and threatening invasion of GE crops and use of neonicotinoids through not only legal action, but also its

public awareness and action campaigns such as Bee Protective and GE labeling initiatives.

Continue the conversation at Beyond Pesticides' 32nd National Pesticide Forum, "Advancing Sustainable Communities: People, Pollinators, and Practices," in Portland, OR April 11-12. The Forum will focus on improving farmworker protections along with solutions to the decline of pollinators and other beneficial organisms, strengthening organic agriculture, and creating healthy buildings, schools and homes. Space is limited so register now.

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