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The Rt Hon Owen Paterson MP
From the Secretary of State

[redacted]

Thank you for your letter of 12 April. It is helpful to have your views and the information set out in the letter of 21 February from [redacted]

The UK Government has taken a close interest in the issue of neonicotinoids. We support the regulation of pesticides to protect people and the environment from harm. We are also well aware of the importance of pollinating insects and would be fully prepared to act if necessary. However, we firmly believe that the proper approach is to base a decision to act on a full assessment of all the scientific evidence. If action is appropriate, this needs to be proportionate to the risks identified. This is the approach which we have taken to the neonicotinoids issue and we are carrying out a review of neonicotinoid authorisations following the recommendation of our independent Advisory Committee on Pesticides.

We have also urged Europe to work from the evidence. We were therefore extremely disappointed that the Commission decided to propose significant restrictions on neonicotinoids on the basis of the partial risk assessment carried out by EFSA using unfinished and unagreed guidance.

Defra's own current view is summarised in an assessment of the key scientific evidence published alongside the Fera study to which you refer. There is good evidence that effects of concern can be triggered in bees by sub-lethal doses of neonicotinoids. However the field evidence suggests that this will not be a normal occurrence.

Since the Commission indicated its intention to restrict neonicotinoids, the UK has been very active in calling for a better approach. I have raised the issue twice in the Agriculture Council and officials have also been working to explain the science and the consequences of taking the wrong action. We have argued that the Commission should withdraw their proposal and should finish the scientific assessment they have begun. We have backed

up this call with our new study and assessment of the evidence, sent to the Commission and to all Member States.

We recognise that, because this issue is a matter for an implementing decision by the Commission rather than for Council decision, the Commission are in a very strong position to drive a proposal through if they are determined. We have therefore worked both to persuade the Commission on the science and to help demonstrate that many Member States are not in agreement with their proposal. We have also worked with Member States to explore compromises that might command wide support and which would be more proportionate than the Commission's proposal.

Our efforts will continue and intensify in the coming days before the appeal committee meeting scheduled for 29 April. As part of this, I will be making our case further with my counterparts at the Agriculture Council on Monday 22 April.

You raise the point that this issue is one of several that impact on the availability of pesticides for agriculture. We are well aware of this point and you will know that, amongst other things, the UK has been arguing hard for a proportionate approach to regulating endocrine disrupting chemicals. We do draw on this wider context when discussing neonicotinoids in Brussels.

I am copying this letter to David Willetts.

THE RT HON OWEN PATERSON MP