

# **Flemish pesticides plan protects pesticides, not nature or health**

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**The Flemish government approved a new pesticide plan last week, but it falls fundamentally short. While pesticides are harmful to biodiversity and public health, it lacks effective measures. The precautionary principle, European directives and scientific recommendations are ignored. Who actually benefits from this plan?**

## **Plan offers insufficient protection**

The plan recognises the health impact of pesticides by providing pesticide-free buffers around schools and healthcare facilities, among others. However, at a maximum of 10 metres, these buffers are far too small to protect effectively, and furthermore do not apply to homes. Extraordinary that children are apparently vulnerable at school, but not at home. A recent review study speaks of a pesticide sphere of influence between 25 metres and 3 000 metres. Even around water courses, the envisaged buffer of 3 or 5 metres remains far below the recommendations of scientists, who speak of at least 18 to 60 metres. The lack of ambition contrasts sharply with the urgent needs. Pesticides are prominent in water and soil, putting pressure on our drinking water production. A bright spot is the announcement of a plan committed to banning difficult-to-remove substances, such as PFAS.

## **Major flaws, despite obligations**

Habitat and Bird Directive areas, together Natura 2000 sites, and other sensitive nature remain largely unprotected from pesticides, despite clear European obligations (e.g. Directive on Pesticide Use - SUD). In and around our most valuable and vulnerable nature, the use of pesticides is allowed according to the plan, even though we know they are very harmful to our biodiversity, soils and ecosystems. Flanders refuses to ban pesticide use here even though several studies show how pesticides are a major cause of the drastic decline of our insects, birds, fish, and other animals that are crucial to our ecosystems. Furthermore, the plan does not take serious steps to implement Integrated Pest Management (IPM), where pesticides are used only as a last resort, much more widely. IPM has been mandatory in the EU since 2014, but implementation is lacking. Pesticide sales in Belgium, also of very toxic pesticides, remain high. The European ambition to halve use by 2030 is also completely absent. The plan's indicators do not give any guarantee of reducing the impact of pesticides, let alone reducing their use.

## **Call for decisive adjustments**

The plan does not address the harmful impact and social costs caused by pesticide use, and remains stuck in a few token measures. The time for non-commitment must be over. Health costs are mounting, and we are watching our biodiversity collapse without taking action. Besides, the Nature Restoration Act is a reality. The pesticide plan should have responded to the obligations

of this Regulation and included clear measures to protect our farmland birds and pollinators, among others, and finally value our European protected nature. By ignoring these obligations, a tightening of the pesticide plan will be inevitable when the National Nature Restoration Plan is drawn up.

In spring 2025, the verdict in the Pesticides case brought by some environmental organisations against the Flemish government for their flawed policy will fall. That will show whether this plan reaches the legal lower limit - ambition and responsible governance are in any case lacking.

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