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## MEDIA RELEASE

**For immediate use**

### **Neonicotinoids: A concern for South Africa's birds and bees?**

Johannesburg, 15 July 2014:

BirdLife South Africa has noted with concern [the Dutch study](#)<sup>1</sup> that links the presence of neonicotinoid pesticides in the environment with a decline in insect-eating birds. [Previous research](#)<sup>2</sup> has already firmly established that chemicals in this class of pesticide, once developed as a more environmentally-friendly option to the poisons in use through the middle of the last century, accumulate and have a negative impact in ecosystems, particularly on invertebrates.

Not only have these pesticides been linked to ongoing declines in a wide range of species, from mayflies to bumblebees, but they have also been linked, through a number of different mechanisms, to the drastic decline in honeybee colonies in Europe and North America.

Insects, like bees, beetles and mayflies, make up a large part of the diet of many birds and are a vital source of protein on which young birds depend, so it stands to reason that anything that impacts on this food source is going to have a knock-on effect on the birds further up the food chain.

The Dutch study linked a decline in insectivorous bird populations in the Netherlands to the presence of a commercial fertiliser called Imidacloprid which is used in a wide range of pesticides, from those used in commercial agriculture to garden sprays and anti-flea dips for pets. It works by interfering with insect nervous systems while being largely harmless to mammals and birds.

The impact of neonicotinoids on bees has resulted in calls for restrictions on its use in the European Union, with the European Food Safety Authority last year stating that these

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<sup>1</sup>Nature(2014)doi:10.1038/nature13531

<sup>2</sup>PLOS 1 (2013) DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0062374

poisons posed an unacceptably high risk to bees<sup>3</sup>, a finding that was challenged by the pesticide industry and the UK's National Farmers Union. Despite these calls, Imidacloprid remains widely used throughout the world's commercial agriculture centres

It is important to note that neonicotinoids are *not* the only thing impacting Europe and North America's bees, with habitat loss and various fungal and parasitic infections all playing a part. Indeed, one of the defences of neonicotinoids by the chemicals industry is the observation that South Africa and Brazil both use these pesticides extensively with no obviously widespread effect on our bee colonies.

Mike Allsopp, who heads up the Honey Bee Research Section at the Agricultural Research Council's Plant Protection Research Institute warns against overreacting to the perceived threat of neonicotinoids like Imidacloprid. "These pesticides are very, very safe as compared to older generation pesticides used in the past", he says. "If used as directed it is very hard to find any particular negative impact for them as compared to what we used to have".

Carol Poole, coordinator at The South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI)'s Honeybee Forage Project notes that South African bees are under all the same pressures as the bees in the northern hemisphere but seem to be more resilient to these threats, possibly because the honeybee is indigenous to Africa, and so doesn't require the careful management that is so prevalent on European and American farms. But, she warns that our understanding of the dynamics of beehives is incomplete and that there is no known reason why we may not experience similar problems to the Northern Hemisphere in the future.

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#### Notes to Editors:

##### **About BirdLife South Africa**

The vision of BirdLife South Africa is to promote the conservation, research, understanding, observation of and enjoyment of natural birds, and their habitats. With one of the highest levels of bird endemism in the world, South Africa has an important obligation to ensure their survival. BirdLife South Africa is the largest non-profit bird conservation organization in the country. It relies on donor funding and financial support from the public to carry out its critical conservation work.

For more information, visit [www.birdlife.org.za](http://www.birdlife.org.za)

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<sup>3</sup>European Food Safety Authority (16 January 2013) "[Conclusion on the peer review of the pesticide risk assessment for bees for the active substance clothianidin](#)" *EFSA Journal* **11**(1):3066.