

Opening speech of the 11th Symposium

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Dear Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen,

It is also my pleasure to welcome you to Wageningen on occasion of the eleventh symposium of the International Commission for Plant-Bee Relationship. Your agenda for this week is entirely devoted to Hazards of Pesticides to Bees. Despite the many years you work already on this topic, the issue is more relevant than ever before.

Before looking ahead, allow me to dwell for a few minutes in the past. It is now for the third time you are gathering in Wageningen, the seat of both the Plant Protection Service and the Agricultural University, nowadays called Wageningen University Research. In 1980 the late Professor Besemer, together with the national Counsel for Bee Breeding, Mr. Pettinga, organised your first meeting here in Wageningen. Mr. Besemer was a senior staff member of the Plant Protection Service and part-time professor at the university. He spent his whole professional career on pesticide research and regulations.

As the use of pesticides in agriculture was booming shortly after the second World War, already in the early fifties Mr Besemer became aware of the undesirable side effects of pesticides on nature and environment, including on bees. As attempts to solve problems with honey bees remained in vain, in 1980 he called together an international meeting of experts with the view to join forces and to learn from each other in search for solutions. Your international Commission was born.

In the years after the ICP-BR matured. Your remit was and is the harmonisation of testing methods, risk classification and risk assessment. Your strength is the fact that you bring together expertise from governments, industry, academia and bee keepers. Particularly through the latter you get feed-back on what is happening outside in the fields, urging for further improvement of risk assessment methodology.

We are now thirty years later and one proudly may say that a lot has been achieved. Harmonized and standardized testing methodology is available, endorsed by EPPO and OECD, giving your work a formal and truly international status. The same goes for the internationally agreed risk assessment approach for which you laid the foundations. Another success you may claim is the inclusion of bee protection provisions based on ICP-BR recommendations in the EU pesticide legislation. Many third countries nowadays benefit from your work. And finally, independent monitoring data shows that effective bee protection can be achieved using your risk assessment methodology.

So why then meeting again here in Wageningen? The world remains changing, at an even faster pace. Pesticides with new modes of actions and new ways of application require an ongoing review of current testing methods and risk assessment approaches. Enhanced threats of Varroa and introduction of new bee diseases urge for a rapid response. In our moderate climate the physical environment of honey bees is changing due to climate change, which might have well implications for the exposure and sensitivity of honey bees for pesticides. On top of that all of us face an enormous public and political interest. Honey bees and pesticides hit the front pages of our news papers and appear on the TV at prime time. Mr Albert Einstein is quoted. You and your work are in the spot lights. What does this mean for the International Commission for Plant-Bee Relationship? First and foremost the Commission should retain its scientific integrity. Whatever you elaborate should be beyond any doubt. And besides that you have to work hard to keep pace with the abovementioned challenges. Testing methods and risk assessments should be adequate and up-to-date. Monitoring programs should be fit to signal new problems.

What remains is the need to continue to join forces. Your expertise and criticism is key to the success of the ICB-PR. What was valid in 1980, is still valid now: cooperation, exchange of information and experiences, learning from each other.

So many important reasons for being here at this 11th symposium now in Wageningen, And given the importance of the safety of honey bees, certainly more symposia are to come in future, wherever in Europe.

We are happy that we have been instrumental in setting up these meetings and achievements through the years. I sincerely hope – with the other Wageningen based institutions like the Board for the Authorisation of Plant Protection Products and Biocides, and the Wageningen University Research - to continue to support the endeavors of the ICB-PR in future with the view to effectively protect honey bees and other beneficial bees.

I wish you a very fruitful meeting here in Wageningen and I hope you will enjoy your stay in our city. I thank you for your attention.

(Dr. Wim H. van Eck)