

Rising aphid pressure forces emergency intervention in Britain's sugar beet industry

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Britain's sugar beet industry has secured emergency regulatory approval for an additional pesticide treatment as growers brace for what could become one of the most challenging virus yellows seasons in recent years.

The temporary authorisation, obtained through a joint effort by the National Farmers' Union (NFU) Sugar Board, British Sugar, and the British Beet Research Organisation (BBRO), permits growers in eastern England to apply a second treatment of the insecticide Insyst SG to combat the peach-potato aphid, the principal carrier of virus yellows.

The decision reflects mounting concerns across the sector as forecasts point to aphid populations reaching their highest levels since 2020, a year that exposed the vulnerability of the UK's sugar beet crop following the withdrawal of neonicotinoid seed treatments under European regulatory restrictions.

For Britain's sugar industry, the stakes are significant.

Virus yellows remains the single most damaging disease affecting sugar beet production, threatening both crop yields and domestic sugar supplies. The disease is spread by aphids feeding on beet plants, with infections capable of severely reducing photosynthetic efficiency and sugar accumulation.

Industry data illustrates the scale of the threat. During the 2020 outbreak, virus yellows affected approximately 38 per cent of the national sugar beet crop, leading to an average 25 per cent decline in yields. Some growers reported losses as high as 80 per cent, underscoring the disease's capacity to inflict substantial economic damage across farming operations.

The latest emergency authorisation provides growers with an additional layer of protection but comes with strict regulatory conditions.

Farmers may only deploy the second Insyst SG application after completing a three-spray programme using fully approved crop protection products. The emergency approval is valid from May 28 through August 1, and applications can only proceed when pre-defined aphid population thresholds are reached, ensuring the treatment is used only when agronomically justified.

Growers must also maintain detailed records documenting aphid counts, disease incidence, treated acreage, application timing and crop development stages, creating a comprehensive monitoring framework designed to support regulatory oversight.

The move highlights a broader challenge confronting European agriculture as growers seek alternatives following restrictions on several previously available crop protection technologies.

Since the ban on neonicotinoid seed treatments, sugar beet producers have faced increasing pressure to manage virus yellows through a combination of foliar insecticides, monitoring systems and integrated pest management strategies. However, rising aphid populations and increasingly unpredictable weather conditions have complicated those efforts.

Industry leaders view the emergency approval as a necessary short-term intervention rather than a permanent solution.

Researchers at BBRO, working alongside growers, plant breeders and industry stakeholders, continue to invest in long-term strategies aimed at reducing dependence on emergency pesticide authorisations. These efforts include the development of virus-tolerant beet varieties, enhanced forecasting models, biological control options and more resilient integrated pest management systems.

The latest approval arrives at a time when food security, domestic production resilience and sustainable crop protection are becoming increasingly interconnected policy priorities across Europe.

For UK sugar beet growers concentrated in Norfolk, Suffolk and surrounding production areas, the emergency measure offers a critical tool to safeguard yields during a season that many fear could test the industry's resilience once again.

While the additional pesticide authorisation may provide immediate relief, the episode underscores a deeper reality confronting modern agriculture: balancing environmental objectives with the need to protect crop productivity remains one of the sector's most complex and unresolved challenges.