

21.11.23

4 Deputy R.J. Ward of the Minister for Economic Development, Tourism, Sport and Culture regarding the effect of the industrial cultivation of cannabis on biodiversity (OQ.233/2021):

Will the Minister advise what impact assessment, if any, has been undertaken of the effect of the industrial growing of cannabis in Jersey on biodiversity?

Senator L.J. Farnham (The Minister for Economic Development, Tourism, Sport and Culture):

There is not a specific assessment for the impact on biodiversity in the same way that there is not for other agricultural crops. It should be noted that cannabis has been grown on the Island for hundreds of years and, as such, is already part of the Island's biodiversity. In the context of medicinal cannabis, in order to achieve a consistent crop, it is grown inside highly controlled conditions preventing interaction with the crop and the outside environment. In relation to field and industrial hemp, this has no approved insecticide nor fungicide and does not receive fertiliser applications.

[10:30]

The male plants produce large amounts of pollen, which is beneficial to invertebrates, female plants produce many highly nutritious seeds which enter the local food web as they are fed into the standing crop or after harvest from the ground. Field hemp also supplies high levels of organic matter back to areas where it is grown, which support improves soil structure. As such, officers have advised that this type of pesticide-free pollen and seed rich cropping is beneficial to our biodiversity.

4.4.1 Deputy R.J. Ward:

That was a very interesting answer. The question I was going to ask was: does the Minister accept that the introduction of what is monoculture provides a real risk of damage to biodiversity and the introduction of new pests to the Island's ecosystem? This is a long-term industrial growing of a particular monoculture crop. I am just looking for reassurances that that has been considered in the long-term.

Senator L.J. Farnham:

Officers are considering the longer-term impact, both beneficial and perhaps otherwise, and studies could follow but at this moment in time there is no concern or evidence to suggest any negative impact in the crops. It is arguably far better for our biodiversity than some existing crops. As the industry grows and evolves, of course, I would like to assure Members that officers will be keeping a close watching brief. I have recently discussed with officers the possibility of doing some studies into various aspects of this and that is something we are looking at.

4.4.2 Senator S.C. Ferguson:

Has the Minister not considered that the continual growing of the same crop on the same piece of land over a considerable time is going to have a detrimental effect on the soil? It is a bit like when we were growing cauliflowers, the continual growth of one crop on one patch of land was very detrimental to the soil. Will the Minister undertake to look at this properly in a scientific manner?

Senator L.J. Farnham:

Yes. I refer the Senator to my original answer in that field hemp supplies high levels of organic matter back into the areas where it is grown and supports improved soil structure. Unlike many other crops we grow, of course, we are well-versed and we understand the consequences of monocropping and growing the same crop year after year, decade after decade. Of course I am referring to the Jersey Royal new potato, the mainstay of our agricultural sector. We are well-versed with that and we have learnt from that and will be applying what we have learnt to future new crops. The new crop strategy, the higher value crop strategy, as Members will know, came out of the rural economy strategy, which is currently being reviewed and updated.

4.4.3 Connétable K. Shenton-Stone of St. Martin:

Could the Minister please let the Assembly know what impact assessments, if any, were undertaken of the industrial growing of cannabis in Jersey on biodiversity before any of the investors took up residence with their ... or, sorry, started their businesses in their vast industrial units, perhaps inside greenhouses? I just believe that no actual impact assessments on biodiversity were carried out before all this started.

Senator L.J. Farnham:

Again, I think I explained that in my opening answer. The advice from our specialised team of officers in the area is quite clear that this type of pesticide-free pollen and seed rich cropping is beneficial to biodiversity. That is why it was not deemed necessary to carry out a separate biodiversity study.

The Connétable of St. Martin:

It just seems mind-blowing to me that it was not deemed necessary ...

The Bailiff:

I am sorry, it does have to be a question, it cannot be an expression of an opinion. Is there a supplementary question?

The Connétable of St Martin:

No, it would only be to just reiterate why there was no biodiversity survey carried out when the Minister is expecting this industry to be millions. Yes, it is basically the same question, sorry.

4.4.4 Deputy R.J. Ward:

I note that the Minister talks about the high pollen production of the crop that he is talking about in an enclosed area. Is there not a risk that that means that it is very likely that that will spread and be carried away from the areas of controlled growth and it could mean that there are distinct effects on our green biodiversity and subsequent attraction of pests well into the future? Is it not seriously needed to just ensure the long-term safety of the Island's biodiversity given the interlink between climate change and biodiversity change?

Senator L.J. Farnham:

There is no evidence of this and no evidence in other jurisdictions where this activity has been undertaken. The only evidence is that, for example, the spread of pollen serves only as a benefit to our natural environment and biodiversity. As I have said, officers are keeping a watching brief on this and it may well be at some time in the near future we do carry out some biodiversity studies with certain aspects of the cropping of hemp.