

EU prepares to brush aside glyphosate herbicide safety concerns

On 8 March, a meeting of EU government experts in Brussels is expected to support the European Commission's proposal to grant a new 15-year lease to glyphosate, the world's most used weedkiller, despite [World Health Organisation \(WHO\) cancer warnings](#). EU governments will only restrict its use in pesticide products that also contain a chemical called polyethoxylated (POE)-tallowamine. These products are already banned in Germany, one of Europe's largest pesticides markets. European decision-makers are also expected to endorse the Commission's request that Monsanto and other pesticide companies produce scientific evidence, by 1 August 2016, proving that glyphosate does not interfere with the human hormone system. However, the EU licence for glyphosate is expected to be renewed ahead of this deadline.

Greenpeace EU food policy director Franziska Achterberg said: *"EU governments seem more concerned about maintaining today's destructive agricultural practices than protecting the health of people and the environment. For a long time, glyphosate was thought to be safe. Now more and more scientific evidence tells us that it's a serious threat to our health and the environment. Ignoring this evidence for another 15 years will cost us dearly. Europe needs an exit strategy from chemical pesticides and a move towards ecological farming"*.

Cancer link

In March 2015, the WHO's cancer research agency (IARC) classified glyphosate as "[probably carcinogenic to humans](#)". This classification is used when there is "*limited evidence*" in humans and "*sufficient evidence*" in laboratory animals that a substance or activity can cause cancer in humans.

However, the European Food Safety Agency (EFSA) said in November 2015 that there was [no scientific evidence](#) of a cancer link. The EFSA report, prepared by Germany's Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR) and rubber-stamped by other national authorities, even indicated that the allowable daily intake of glyphosate, i.e. the amount that humans can ingest each day over a lifetime without any appreciable health effects, could be safely increased.

Ninety-six independent scientists, including several of those involved in the WHO's cancer review, slammed the EFSA assessment as "[not supported by the evidence](#)". French health safety agency ANSES also [recently raised concerns](#) about glyphosate's safety.

Corporate profits before safety

[EU regulations](#) prohibit the use of pesticides, including herbicides, when there is sufficient evidence in animals that these substances are linked to cancer, based on IARC criteria. According to IARC, glyphosate fulfils these criteria.

Monsanto and other pesticides companies have produced several studies and [review articles](#) to prepare the EU whitewash. Monsanto has [welcomed EFSA's opinion](#). Much of Monsanto's business hinges on sales of its glyphosate-based herbicide, Roundup, and of crops that have been genetically engineered to tolerate it.

Monsanto and other glyphosate producers [warned](#) of massive economic losses if glyphosate is no longer available. Farmers too have come out forcefully to keep glyphosate on the market. The UK's [national farmers union](#) called glyphosate "*a vital tool for farmers*". Its [counterpart](#) in Germany said that "*glyphosate has a large scope as a broad-spectrum herbicide and we have no alternative available among other herbicides*".

However, Germany's Federal Research Centre for Cultivated Plants ([Julius Kühn Institute](#)), a public authority and research body, has shown that, in time, municipalities, gardeners and even farmers can do without it. It has found that glyphosate use can be significantly reduced, especially in arable farming, without economic

losses. Glyphosate application “*should not be regarded as a standard measure in arable crop production systems,*” the institute said.

EFSA vs IARC

The WHO’s cancer agency, IARC, has classified glyphosate as “[probably carcinogenic](#)”. IARC is widely [respected](#) for its transparency, its rigorous methodology and for the proven independence of its scientific experts. When EFSA’s assessment clashed head-on with IARC, EFSA [claimed](#) it based its own review on a wider range of studies and considered factors that IARC had ignored. EFSA refused to release the additional studies, accepting the companies’ claims that publication would violate their “[commercial interests and intellectual property rights](#)”.

However, EFSA’s assessment was [criticised by leading experts](#) involved in the IARC review. In response, EFSA resorted to insults, describing the criticism as “[Facebook science](#)”. It [said](#) that IARC failed to consider certain studies “*even though this information was publicly available*” and that it “*focused on finding statistically significant ‘trends’ in specific studies but presented no information on how it considered the biological relevance*”. EFSA rejected IARC’s demand to remove some the accusations published on EFSA’s website, leading to IARC [cancelling a meeting](#) between the two agencies to discuss the divergences.

Major use in fields, gardens and public spaces

Glyphosate is the world’s [most used](#) weedkiller. Besides commercial uses in agriculture, it is also used in public spaces and private gardens. More than 100 products containing glyphosate are sold in EU countries.

Glyphosate is broadly used in industrial farming of arable crops such as wheat, sunflower and oilseed rape. Post-harvest spraying is the most common use, replacing ploughing of the fields. But glyphosate is also sprayed on crops before harvest to accelerate the ripening process and to dry out grains. Through this practice, called desiccation, significant amounts of glyphosate residues enter our food. Desiccation has been banned in Austria for food and animal feed crops, and is severely restricted in Germany.

Environmental and health concerns

When introduced in the 1970s, glyphosate was deemed safe compared to other herbicides in use at the time. However, an increasing number of studies have revealed serious concerns for human health and the environment.

A recent [paper](#) by leading scientists concluded that “*regulatory estimates of tolerable daily intakes for glyphosate in the United States and European Union are based on outdated science*”. It also highlighted the need for further study on whether glyphosate can have disrupting effects on the human hormone system. The scientists focused on health-related issues but also noted that there are “*many environmental and soil-ecosystem problems associated with heavy and repeated uses of glyphosate-based herbicides affecting other organisms (for example, fish, butterflies, earthworms, beneficial soil microorganisms)*”.

Given the widespread use of glyphosate, it is unavoidable that people and wildlife are exposed to it through the air, water, soil, plants and food. Glyphosate has been found in [bread in the UK](#), for instance, and more recently in fourteen [German beers](#).

Commercial herbicide products that combine glyphosate with other chemical substances have been found to be even more toxic than glyphosate on its own. EFSA has pointed out that these products need to be thoroughly tested in particular for their health effects, including their hormone disrupting potential. Under current rules, it is national authorities, not the EU, that have to assess their safety.

Pesticides approval: EU puts cart before the horse

The European Commission has proposed that Monsanto and other pesticide companies produce scientific evidence, by 1 August 2016, proving that glyphosate does not interfere with the human hormone system. However, the EU licence for glyphosate is expected to be renewed ahead of this deadline.

The EU Ombudsman has recently [slammed](#) the European Commission's practice of accepting proof of a pesticide's safety after its formal approval. She said the practice should be applied "*restrictively*" and only "*where there is no risk that the conclusion on the safety of the active substance could be flawed*".

Private sector and local authorities show the way

Several retailers across Europe have decided to discontinue sales of glyphosate-based products. These include DIY shops in Germany (Bauhaus, Baumarkt, Hornbach, Obi and Toom), Switzerland (Coop, Migros), Austria (Bauhaus, Bellaflora) and Luxembourg (Cactus, Profi Zentrum). In the Netherlands, major garden centres and DIY shops have stopped selling glyphosate, including Intratuin, Praxis, Groenrijk, Ranzijn and Hornbach.

Cities such as Edinburgh (UK), Hamburg (Germany), Rennes (France), Rovereto and Livorno (Italy) have banned the use of glyphosate in public spaces.

Next steps

- After the national expert vote, the European Commission will formalise the 15-year renewal of glyphosate by the end of June, when its current licence runs out.
- The European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) is about to investigate the human health effects of glyphosate in order to establish an official [EU classification](#). This process will only be finalised towards the end of 2017.
- In May 2016, the WHO-Food and Agriculture Organisation's Joint Meeting on Pesticide Residues (JMPR) will update its own assessments following [recommendations](#) by an [expert task force](#) to incorporate more published studies, rather than relying solely on unpublished studies provided by the industry.
- The United States' Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is also expected to publish a [preliminary glyphosate assessment](#) for public comment in 2016.

Greenpeace demands

- European governments should oppose the renewal of glyphosate's licence as long as uncertainty remains over the risks it poses to human health and the environment.
- In case glyphosate is approved at the EU level, governments should ban the commercial use of any pesticide containing glyphosate on their territory, as long as uncertainty remains over its safety.
- Retailers should discontinue glyphosate products and promote non-chemical alternatives.
- EFSA should release all carcinogenicity studies to allow independent evaluation. It should also set up an expert panel, including scientists involved in the IARC review, to re-evaluate the cancer link.

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