

Glyphosate found 'not carcinogenic': Key European safety agency joins consensus view on herbicide's safety

The European Union regulatory agency considered the “last word” on whether glyphosate, the key ingredient in the world’s most popular weedkiller, causes cancer has reviewed the research and concluded the herbicide is [not carcinogenic](#).

The agency said “the available scientific evidence did not meet the criteria to classify glyphosate as a carcinogen, as a mutagen or as toxic for reproduction”.

“This conclusion was based both on the human evidence and the weight of the evidence of all the animal studies reviewed,” Tim Bowmer, the chairman of the European Chemicals Agency’s Committee for Risk Assessment.

Glyphosate has been the subject of a relicensing battle which has split [governments](#), regulators and [scientists](#), with one arm of the World Health Organization [saying](#) in a ‘hazard assessment’ that the herbicide could post a cancer risk to workers, while other WHO groups, including WHO itself, and multiple agencies around the world, concluding it poses no harm to workers or to our food supply.

The ECHA announcement likely means it will be permitted for European Union use for at least the next 15 years, although a final decision will likely not come before the end of the year.

[For more background on glyphosate, read the GLP’s: [Glyphosate: Dangerous chemical or anti-GMO bogeyman?](#)]

Reactions

Even before the decision, ECHA came under attack from anti-GMO and anti-chemical activists. Greenpeace accused it of conflicts of interests, claiming several of its members had either undertaken consultancy work for chemical firms or worked for institutes that had.

Following the report’s release, Greenpeace EU’s food policy director, Franziska Achterberg, said:

ECHA has gone to great lengths to sweep all evidence that glyphosate can cause cancer under the carpet. The data vastly exceeds what’s legally necessary for the EU to ban glyphosate, but ECHA has looked the other way.

Statements about ECHA’s decision have come in from various groups. The Campaign for Accuracy in Public Health Research (CAPHR) issued the following statement:

“ECHA’s confirmation that glyphosate is not a carcinogen underscores the serious flaws in IARC’s evaluation of carcinogens. IARC consistently fails to base its reviews on a full

consideration of the available scientific evidence, which explains why regulatory bodies around the globe disagree with its determination that glyphosate is a ‘probable human carcinogen.’ Until IARC reforms its unscientific monograph process, its evaluations will continue to be out-of-step with the rest of the public health and regulatory community.”

The website [Sustainable Pulse](#), funded by organic industry supporters who also maintain websites for controversial anti-GMO activist scientists including Gilles-Éric Séralini, blasted the decision:

Following in the footsteps of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) has dismissed scientific evidence showing that the controversial weedkiller glyphosate could cause cancer. The ECHA assessment, released Wednesday, could pave the way for a new 15-year EU licence for the world’s most heavily used weedkiller, which the World Health Organisation’s cancer research agency (IARC) has classified as a “probable” cause of cancer. To reach its conclusion, ECHA rejected glaring scientific evidence of cancers in laboratory animals, ignored warnings by more than 90 independent scientists, and relied on unpublished studies commissioned by glyphosate producers.

The decision is in accord with findings from the [European Food Safety Authority](#), US Environmental Protection Agency, the German Risk Association, Health Canada and every known regulatory body that has reviewed the data. [See GLP’s GMO FAQ “Is glyphosate (Roundup) dangerous?”]

“Science prevailed,” said Graeme Taylor, of the European Crop Protection Agency. “Glyphosate is not carcinogenic. We expect the European commission to move swiftly with the registration process for the substance in the EU and grant a 15-year approval.”

Why the controversy?

Glyphosate has emerged as today’s most discussed agricultural chemical, a modern [DDT](#). Opponents of genetic modifications of crops often use it as a symbol of the potential harm — including cancer — supposedly caused by its use with “Roundup Ready” corn, soybeans and cotton, which have been designed to resist the world’s most popular weedkiller. On the other hand, farmers swear by its effectiveness and scientists have proven its overall safety.

The regulation of glyphosate had been in a storm over the past two years. The situation became particularly volatile in 2015 after the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) — the hazard assessment arm of the World Health Organization — issued a report [declaring glyphosate](#) a “2a: probably carcinogenic” substance. The decision, based on a review of scientific evidence for a hazard (as opposed to an environmental risk), was met with cheers from anti-GMO groups like Moms Against Monsanto and Friends of the Earth. But it was heavily criticized by scientists and regulators, including those at the European Food Safety Agency (EFSA), who at one time accused IARC of conducting “Facebook science.”

The assessment was challenged by a number of other safety regulators, including [EFSA](#), the [Canadian](#) Pest Management Regulatory Agency, Germany’s Federal Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, New Zealand’s Environmental Protection Authority and the World Health Organization, which all rejected IARC’s methodology and conclusions, declaring that glyphosate was not a carcinogen.

Still, the IARC decision persuaded the European Union to only extend the license to use the herbicide in the EU for 18 months, instead of a standard six years. Early last year, European Health Commissioner Vytenis Andriukaitis [declared that](#) “the last word (on glyphosate’s carcinogenicity) belongs to the ECHA.”

That last word has now been spoken.

Next steps

The ECHA said it reviewed the same scientific reports that IARC did, but also expanded its range of studies. In a video accompanying the announcement, the agency’s chief scientific officer, Ari Karjalainen, explained that while methodology was essentially identical to IARC’s, his agency’s criteria for determining cancer risk was different (his portion starts at about 1:55):

The ECHA determination means the European Union is more likely to fully extend the license for use of glyphosate in member nations — although there are still likely to be political battles ahead. Whether this will have an impact outside of Europe remains to be seen. Certainly, the original IARC assessment had an impact. In California, for example, the state is considering labeling glyphosate as a carcinogen under its Proposition 65 law.

The ECHA did find two issues with glyphosate, which don’t directly impact its use as an agricultural herbicide. It found that direct exposure could cause serious eye damage, as well as long-term harm to aquatic environments. These were issues already known to regulators, users and manufacturers (which now extend beyond Monsanto now that the chemical’s patent has expired).

Now, the European Union will determine whether or not to approve use of the chemical for 15 years, based on rulings from several agencies but mainly upon the decision by ECHA.

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