

Renewing authorisation for glyphosate

A scientific controversy has recently erupted over diverging assessments of the carcinogenicity of glyphosate, one of the world's most widely used active substances in herbicides. Against this backdrop, the European Commission has proposed to renew the authorisation of glyphosate for 15 years. A motion for a resolution adopted by the ENVI Committee calling on the Commission to reconsider its proposal is expected to be tabled for plenary vote in April.

Background

Glyphosate is an active substance used in broad-spectrum herbicides. On the market since 1974, it is one of the world's most widely used active substances in plant protection products, now accounting for about 25% of the global herbicide market. [Research](#) indicates that in 2014, 825 million tonnes of glyphosate were used globally, of which 90% in agriculture. Other uses are mainly for weed control in gardens and non-cultivated areas. The [Glyphosate Task Force](#), an industry consortium, stresses that glyphosate enables higher crop yields and reduced labour requirements in agriculture. [Pesticide Action Network](#), a coalition of environmental NGOs, highlights environmental and health concerns associated with the substance.

Diverging scientific assessments

On 29 July 2015, the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), a branch of the World Health Organization, published a [study](#) classifying glyphosate as 'probably carcinogenic to humans ([Group 2A](#))' based on 'limited evidence' for cancer in humans, 'sufficient evidence' for cancer in experimental animals, and 'strong evidence' that glyphosate 'can operate through two key characteristics of known human carcinogens'. Conversely, on 12 November 2015, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) published a [risk assessment](#) concluding that 'glyphosate is unlikely to pose a carcinogenic hazard to humans' based on a 'large body of evidence', including 'key studies not considered by IARC' that remain unpublished (although industry has recently offered to provide some limited access). The divergences have developed into a major controversy involving scientists and public bodies.

Commission proposal for authorisation renewal

Under Regulation 1107/2009 on plant protection products, pesticides undergo a dual authorisation process: first, active substances are authorised at EU level by the European Commission through implementing regulations (based on a risk assessment by EFSA and an opinion issued by a standing committee of Member State representatives). Plant protection products containing the active substance are subsequently authorised at national level. In October 2015, the Commission extended the authorisation of glyphosate (expiring on 31 December 2015) by six months in order to leave EFSA enough time to take into account the IARC report in its risk assessment, which was finalised in November 2015.

Based on EFSA's risk assessment, the Commission has proposed a draft implementing regulation, to renew the authorisation of glyphosate for the maximum 15 years. A vote on the standing committee's opinion scheduled for 7-8 March 2016 was postponed as a result of divisions among Member States. If no qualified majority emerges in the standing committee, the onus will be on the European Commission to decide.

Parliament reaction

On 22 March 2016, Parliament's ENVI Committee adopted a [motion for a resolution](#) objecting to the draft measure, referring, among other things, to the [precautionary principle](#) and the need to ensure a high level of protection of health and the environment. It urges the Commission to withdraw its draft implementing regulation, and calls on the Commission and EFSA to disclose all the scientific evidence used in the risk assessment. Parliament is due to vote on the non-binding resolution during the April I plenary session.

