Pesticides in food: what is the European Parliament doing to help?

Europeans are concerned about pesticide residues in food and their potential effect on health. Find out how MEPs are tackling the issue.

About 50% of the food tested by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) in 2016 contained pesticide residues, with 3.8% exceeding legal limits. In the EU, pesticides and the active substances in them are carefully monitored, but in recent years, concern has been raised over the approval procedure, especially after controversy about the renewal of glyphosate approval in 2017.
To better protect people’s health, the European Parliament wants action to improve the management of pesticide use in the EU.

**Sustainable use of pesticides**

On 12 February 2019, Parliament adopted a report on how to better implement the directive on the sustainable use of pesticides. The directive aims to promote integrated pest management and alternative methods of pest control. This would be achieved through national action plans where EU countries set targets for reducing the risks and the impact of pesticide use.

MEPs expressed their regret that most EU countries had not succeeded in significantly promoting alternative techniques and reducing the risk and use of pesticides. The report noted that only five countries had established measurable targets regarding pesticides.

The ongoing decline of Europe’s insect populations has been linked to the use of pesticides and could affect how much agriculture will be able to produce in the future. MEPs called on EU countries to protect the environment and people’s health by promoting the use of fewer pesticides and prioritising non-chemical methods whenever possible. They also urged the European Commission to propose a binding, EU-wide target for the reduction of pesticide use.

**More transparent pesticide approval procedure**

In February 2018, Parliament appointed a special committee to look into the EU’s authorisation procedure for pesticides. On 16 January, MEPs backed the committee’s final report pushing for more transparent procedures to ensure political accountability.

MEPs recommend that:

- The public should be granted access to studies used in the authorisation procedure
- Manufacturers asking for substance approval should register all regulatory studies in a public register to ensure all relevant information is taken into account
- Scientific experts should review studies on carcinogenicity of glyphosate and maximum residue levels for soils and surface water should be set
- Pesticides and their active substances should be tested thoroughly, taking into account cumulative effects and long-term toxicity
- Pesticides should no longer be used over a wide area near schools, childcare facilities, playing fields, hospitals, maternity hospitals and care homes

**Better access to studies on food chain safety**

In December 2018 Parliament voted in favour of an update of the general food law regulation covering food safety in EU at all stages of the food chain, including animal health, plant protection and production.

The proposed new rules aim to improve public access to studies used by the European Food Safety Agency in the risk assessment of food products, and to ensure the studies are reliable, objective and independent.
A common European registry would be set up for commissioned studies, so the European Food Safety Agency can check whether companies are suppressing any unfavourable studies. If there is reason to doubt the evidence provided by the applicants, the agency could request additional studies.

**Endocrine disruptors**

Endocrine disrupting chemicals are used in agriculture to protect plants from pests by interfering with growth or reproduction. They may affect human health and be linked to hormone-related cancers, diabetes and infertility.

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In October 2017, MEPs blocked the European Commission’s proposal that would have **exempted some chemicals in pesticides** from being identified as endocrine disrupting chemicals, even though some were actually designed to attack an organism’s endocrine system.

**Promoting alternatives**

Europeans bought **€30.7 billion worth of organic food** in 2016, an increase of almost 50% from 2012. In 2018, MEPS updated existing **rules on organic production and labelling** in response to major changes to the sector.

In 2017, MEPS adopted a resolution calling on the Commission to draw up proposals to fast-track the evaluation, authorisation and registration of **low-risk pesticides**.

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**Find out more**

Fact sheet: food safety  
Briefing: EU’s pesticides authorisation  
Briefing: reconsidering the general food law  
Eurobarometer survey on consumers’ perceptions of food-related risks