

EU downplays cancer risk from weedkiller in win for Monsanto (Update)

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Glyphosate was first used as the active ingredient in the herbicide Roundup, manufactured by US agri-giant Monsanto

A highly sensitive EU report on Thursday claimed one of the world's most popular weedkillers is "unlikely" to cause cancer, countering the UN and handing a victory to agri-business giant Monsanto.

The report by the European Food Safety Agency concerned glyphosate,

first used in the 1970s as the key ingredient in the Monsanto-made herbicide Roundup, and now made generically around the world.

The agency advises the European Commission, the EU's executive arm, which must now use the report to decide jointly with member states whether to extend its approval for glyphosate for another 10 years.

The EU's EFSA watchdog "concluded that glyphosate is unlikely to pose a carcinogenic hazard to humans and the evidence does not support classification with regard to its carcinogenic potential according to (EU regulations)."

The report also expressed doubt that glyphosate harmfully modified human DNA, another side effect alleged by some researchers.

"The European Commission takes note. We have until June 2016 to take a decision after consultations with member states," commission spokesman Enrico Brivio told a news briefing.

The finding by the EU agency is a major win for Monsanto, which has lobbied hard to keep glyphosate off the EU's list of unsafe chemicals.

The findings counter those of the UN's International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), which said in March that Roundup and similar products were "probably" carcinogenic.

France called for ban

That warning, which angered Monsanto, pushed France to call for a ban on glyphosate-linked products and for Colombia to halt their use to destroy coca plantations in its fight against cocaine production.

"The EFSA conclusion ... confirms the previous evaluations of

glyphosate by regulatory authorities around the world, which have consistently concluded that the application of glyphosate poses no unacceptable risk to human health, animals or the environment," said Richard Garnett, head of lobby European Glyphosate Task Force, of which Monsanto is a key member.

Keeping glyphosate legal is hugely important for US-based Monsanto as it looks to expand worldwide sales of its genetically modified crops, which are regarded with suspicion in much of Europe.

Monsanto crops are specifically engineered to resist glyphosate-based products, allowing farmers to douse fields indiscriminately with the herbicide to kill weeds.

The EFSA however for the first time set a limit to the human exposure to glyphosate, at 0.5 mg per kilo of body weight.

Anti-GMO activists were outraged by the decision, accusing the EU of giving in to pressure from Monsanto and other powerful European food lobbyists.

"EFSA's safety assurances on glyphosate raise serious questions about its scientific independence," said Greenpeace policy expert Franziska Achterberg.

"Much of its report is taken directly from unpublished studies commissioned by glyphosate producers," said Achterberg.

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