

EU breaks stalemate to renew licence on controversial weedkiller (Update 3)

November 27 2017



Activists acting as European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker (R) and Monsanto-characters with their faces painted with a skull enact a tug-of-war against EU citizens during an action calling for the EU Commission to vote against renewing glyphosate's licence

EU countries broke months of deadlock on Monday when they voted to renew the licence for the controversial weedkiller glyphosate for five years after heavyweight Germany surprisingly voted in favour despite

health concerns.

With the bloc's largest population, Germany's change of heart was instrumental in ending the stalemate within the 28-nation union over the fate of the pesticide, which some critics fear causes cancer.

But its U-turn appeared also to reveal extraordinary tensions in Chancellor Angela Merkel's efforts to form a new governing coalition, after a minister in Berlin said German officials in Brussels had disobeyed direct orders to abstain on the vote.

Glyphosate was introduced in 1974 by US agro-giant Monsanto under the brand-name Roundup. A WHO study found it was "probably carcinogenic" but later studies have disagreed.

Eighteen of the 28 EU states voted in favour of the European Commission's proposal for a five-year renewal, with nine including France voting against, and one abstaining.

"Today's vote shows that when we all want to, we are able to share and accept our collective responsibility in decision making," EU Health Commissioner Vytenis Andriukaitis said in a statement.

Europeans 'betrayed'

Divisions over the weedkiller within the EU have dragged on since June 2016, when its previous 15-year licence expired and an 18-month extension was granted.

Environmental campaigners condemned Monday's decision.

"Today's approval, even if only for five years, is a missed opportunity to get rid of this risky weedkiller and start to get farmers off the chemical

treadmill," said Adrian Bebb of Friends of the Earth Europe.

Greenpeace's Franziska Achterberg said: "The people who are supposed to protect us from dangerous pesticides have failed to do their jobs and betrayed the trust Europeans place in them."

Monsanto's rival, the German chemical giant Bayer, also said it regretted the decision, voicing support for a 15-year extension of the licence for glyphosate.

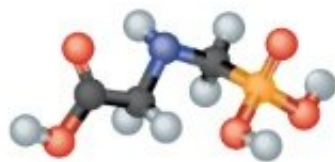
"Regulators and scientific bodies across the world, including in Europe... have carefully evaluated the component and decided that glyphosate is safe," it said in a statement.

Two weeks ago the European Commission, the EU executive, fell short of the majority needed to renew the licence when it expires on December 15, as only half of the 28 member states voted for its proposal.

Germany abstained from the last vote, but on Monday Berlin changed its mind after receiving assurances on animal welfare and private use of the weedkiller, a European source said.

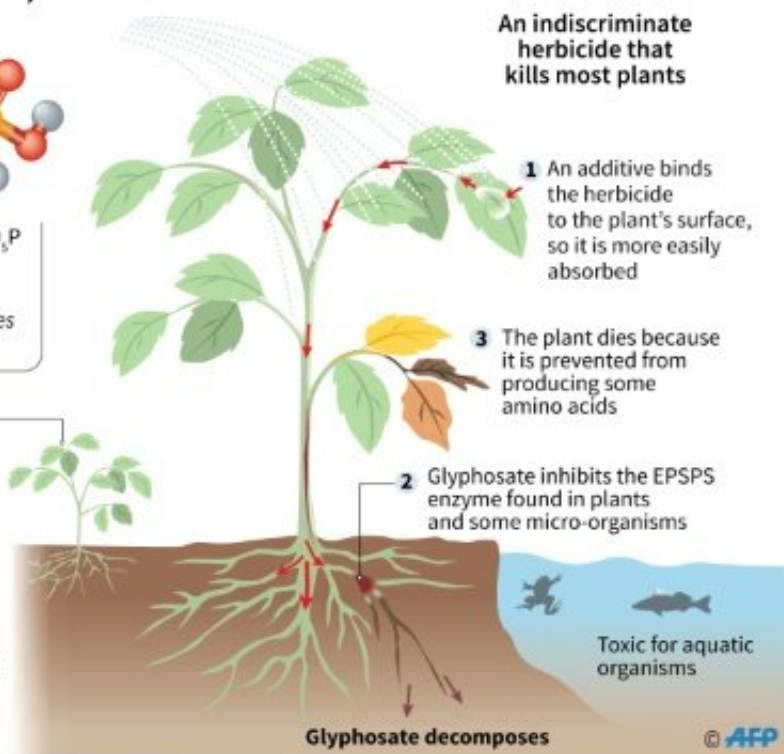
Glyphosate

One of the world's most widely used weedkillers



Chemical structure: $C_3H_5NO_3P$
 Main agent in Monsanto's Roundup herbicide
 Produced by other companies since 2000 (public patent)

- Some plants have become resistant
- Some seeds (corn, soya) have been genetically modified to tolerate glyphosate



Sources: Monsanto, CIR, EFSA

EU states on Monday renewed the licence for the controversial weedkiller glyphosate for five years, in a surprise decision to break a long stalemate over a substance that critics say causes cancer

However, German Environment Minister Barbara Hendricks, of the Social Democrats who had initially refused to consider renewing their coalition with Merkel, said Agricultural Minister Christian Schmidt of the Merkel-allied CSU party had gone against her orders.

"Exactly two hours before the beginning of the meeting... I declared clearly to colleague (Christian) Schmidt that I do not agree with an extension of the renewal of glyphosate," she said.

But she said he had voted to renew the licence instead of abstaining as

planned.

The previous abstention was a compromise between opposition to glyphosate in the environmental ministry and support for it in the agriculture ministry.

Merkel said Monday her party was ready to hold serious talks with the Social Democrats to form a government, warning that time is pressing as Europe faces a slew of challenges.

But Social Democrat Bundestag representative Andrea Nahles said Monday's vote in Brussels represented "an obvious violation of trust on the part of the CSU".

The decision marks a disappointment for the French government, which pushed unsuccessfully for only a three-year licence following widespread concern in the country over the chemical's health impact.

French President Emmanuel Macron tweeted that he has asked the French government to look for alternative pesticides and ban glyphosate in France within three years.

Paris will also lobby for the EU to change the way it determines the safety of chemical products, the prime minister's office told AFP.

Three million sign petition

Environmental campaigners like Greenpeace have been calling for an outright ban in Europe for glyphosate. Last month they handed the EU a petition signed by more than 1.3 million people backing such a move.

Activists point to a 2015 study by the World Health Organisation's (WHO) International Agency for Research on Cancer that concluded it

was "probably carcinogenic".

But the European Food Safety Authority and the European Chemicals Agency both say glyphosate is unlikely to cause cancer in humans, in line with a 2016 review carried out by WHO experts and the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation.

Monsanto insists glyphosate meets the standards required to renew its European licence.

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