

Controversial weedkiller keeps EU in a tangle (Update)

November 9 2017

With a deadline just weeks away, the European Union failed Thursday to break a hardening stalemate on whether to renew the licence for the widely-used weedkiller glyphosate, which critics fear causes cancer.

The European Commission said it fell short of the majority needed to renew the license for five years when it expires December 15, as only half of the 28 member states voted for its proposal.

"Given that a qualified majority could not be reached ... the result of the vote is 'no opinion,'" said the commission, the EU's executive and regulatory arm.

The latest result was hailed by environmental campaigners, including those who rallied outside EU headquarters to mock US agro-food giant Monsanto, the maker of the best-selling glyphosate product Roundup.

"Today we have seen that the seventh attempt of the European Commission to renew Glyphosate has failed again," said Luis Morago, Avaaz campaign director.

"Monsanto wanted 15 more years and they can't even get five."

The European Commission, which had originally recommended approving the herbicide's use for another decade, said it will now submit its proposal to an appeals committee by the end of November.

'Overwhelming pressure'

The weedkiller deadlock in the EU has dragged on since June 2016, when its previous 15-year licence expired, and an 18-month extension was granted.

Thursday's vote failed to pass when experts from nine countries, including France, Belgium and Italy opposed renewal and experts from another five countries abstained.

Fourteen states voted for the proposal, including Denmark, Britain and the Netherlands, the commission said.

France's environment minister Nicola Hulot, a celebrity green activist, said he was "proud" that France "stood firm" against a five-year renewal as it seeks to phase out the herbicide and scrap it in three years.

The European Parliament, the EU's only elected body, last month said glyphosate should be renewed only until 2022 and banned thereafter.

However, faced with growing uproar over the alleged dangers of glyphosate use, EU states balked last month at a renewal and the commission then proposed reducing the timeframe from ten years to five years.

Environmental campaigners Greenpeace and other critics are 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.

"Overwhelming public pressure is paying off, with a clear lack of political support to extend the licence for glyphosate," said Adrian Bebb

of Friends of the Earth Europe.

Despite the result, Greenpeace expressed concern that the commission will adopt its own proposal without the backing of European governments, which it has the power to do.

"The EU needs to ban it now, not in three, five or ten more years," Greenpeace EU food policy director Franziska Achterberg said.

'Politics wins, science loses'

Activists point to a 2015 study by the World Health Organization'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 Organization.

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

The European Crop Protection Association's spokesman Graeme Taylor said the pesticide industry found it "disappointing there is still no clear decision".

"Where politics wins, science loses," he added.

However, the science itself is under debate.

Members of the European Parliament last month called for the establishment of a panel to probe claims that Monsanto unduly

influenced research into its weedkiller's safety.

Europe's main farmers union, the Copa-Cogeca, said before the vote there is no alternative but to renew the licence if the continent wants to maintain yields.

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