

Two-thirds of Europeans support ban on glyphosate, says Yougov poll

Survey of more than 7,000 people across the EU's five biggest states backs prohibition of the most widely used agricultural chemical



About 9.4m tonnes of glyphosate has been sprayed on crops since 1974. Photograph: Philippe Huguen/AFP/Getty Images

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Two-thirds of Europeans support a ban on glyphosate, the most widely used agricultural chemical in the world's history, according to a new Yougov poll.

A prohibition on the herbicide ingredient was backed by three-quarters of Italians, 70% of Germans, 60% of French and 56% of Britons, in a survey of more than 7,000 people across the EU's five biggest states.

Up to 150 MEPs in Strasbourg are expected to give urine samples today and tomorrow to see if they contain residues of the ingredient, ahead of a symbolic vote on prohibition this Wednesday.

Previous tests have found traces of the residue in the urine of people from 18 different European countries, and in over 60% of breads sold in the UK.

The Green MEP Bart Staes told the Guardian that the MEPs' test was inspired by a recent "Urinal 2015" test which detected glyphosate in Germany's 14 best-selling beers, stirring public unease.

Staes said: "This poll clearly shows that the European public does not want... the authorisation of glyphosate, and certainly not until June 2031."

Glyphosate is used in best-selling pesticides made by Monsanto, Dow and Syngenta, but the herbicide has divided scientific opinion.

The World Health Organisation's cancer scientists last year dubbed it "probably carcinogenic to humans" while the EU's European Food Safety Authority (Efsa) declared it "unlikely" to pose a public health risk.

An ensuing row over best scientific practice and industry involvement in the legislative process ended with the European commission unable to pass a proposal to relicence the substance for another 15 years.

With 11 of the EU's 28 states now thought unlikely to back relicensing, the new poll will add momentum to environmental opponents of the controversial chemical.

A commission source said: "We are trying to get as much consensus as possible among the member states. If there are reasonable concerns, they can be addressed. All things are on the table."

Commission negotiators are working on compromise proposals varying from a shorter extension, to a ban on certain co-formulants which increase plant uptake of glyphosate.

The Netherlands wants a postponement until the end of 2017, to allow the European Chemicals Agency to complete a study of the chemical.

Criticisms from some scientists that the Efsa ruling depended on six unpublished reports by an industry-funded group have elicited a response, after a transparency request by the EU's health commissioner, Vytenis Andriukaitis.

Last week, the Glyphosate taskforce said that it would allow reading room access to all parts of the unpublished studies, after "confidential information" had been removed from the texts.

"We are seriously concerned that the anxiety that is being generated in the public mind by the questioning of the scientific findings of studies ... is undermining the whole basis for the evaluation of plant protection products," the board's chair, Dr Richard Garnett wrote to Andriukaitis.

Garnett also works as the head of Monsanto Europe's global crop protection regulatory affairs unit.

Most global use of glyphosate is for GM-resistant crops and, as a non-selective herbicide, environmentalists say that it can kill all plants, algae, bacteria and fungi in a crop's vicinity, creating knock-on effects for biodiversity.

Some 9.4m tonnes of glyphosate have been applied to crops since 1974, enough to spray half a pound of Roundup onto every cultivated acre of land on the planet.



Monsanto's Roundup weedkiller on display at a garden shop at Bonneuil-Sur-Marne near Paris, France. Photograph: Charles Platiau/Reuters

"In the EU, the precautionary principle applies and as long as risk to human life cannot be ruled out, there must be no approval for such a strong plant poison," said Jörg Rohwedder of WeMove.EU, one of the group's which commissioned the YouGov poll.

Graeme Taylor, a spokesman for the European Crop Protection Association (Ecpa) countered: "We recognise that there is public concern but we also see 90,000 pages of evidence and 3,300 peer-reviewed studies in favour of glyphosate's approval."

A separate YouGov poll for Ecpa this month has found that 58% of Britons agreed with the statement: "To keep our food affordable, I think that farmers should be able to tackle weeds, pests and disease with pesticides". Twenty-one percent disagreed.

Glyphosate's current licence is due to run out in June, although a temporary extension could be granted while the EU agrees a position.

A vote on relicensing could be held as early as next week, but is thought most likely to take place at a committee meeting in Brussels on 19 May.

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