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EU must follow science-based authorisation approach says Julie Girling

Written by Julie Girling MEP on 7 October 2016 in Opinion
Opinion

Policymakers shouldn't use public health as an excuse to delay authorisations, adds veteran British MEP.

Active substances are authorised in the EU after following a rigorous scientific assessment by the designated rapporteur member state and the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA).

Like all other products up for re-authorisation, glyphosate has been through this process and deemed to be safe for use, including private use.

Calls for glyphosate to be banned undermine this process and set a dangerous precedent for forthcoming renewals of other plant protection products.

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The debate on glyphosate in the European Parliament was mainly focused on the importance placed on risk versus hazard, and the differing conclusions of scientific bodies in this regard.

Many colleagues based their positions on the International Agency for Research on Cancer's (IARC) conclusion that glyphosate is "probably carcinogenic to humans", i.e. hazard classification without also taking into account the conclusions of another WHO body, the Joint Meeting on Pesticide Residues (JMPR), which focused on the risk to humans via exposure, and stated in a recent report that glyphosate is "unlikely to cause cancer in people via dietary exposure".

No reference to the latter conclusion was made in Parliament's resolution of 13 April.

From the EU perspective, EFSA argued in its scientific opinion that glyphosate is unlikely to pose a carcinogenic hazard to humans; this conclusion has been largely criticised by groups who argue that EFSA lacks independence and transparency.

As an advocate of evidence-based policymaking, I believe that all of the conclusions cited are important and valid in this discussion. However, I believe that ultimately policies have to be made with a real world application in mind, which is why we need to consider the risk to humans and not just the potential hazard.

In addition, the debate on glyphosate in the European Parliament and the subsequent resolution adopted on 13 April have included attempts to forge a links between glyphosate and potential endocrine disrupting properties – despite both EFSA and the US Environmental Protection Agency concluding that there is no evidence of such effect – and also between glyphosate use and GMOs.

Conflating these issues only serves to create confusion and distrust among the public while sidestepping proper scientific debate about glyphosate's safety.

I welcomed the Commission's common- sense approach this summer to grant a reauthorisation for glyphosate – albeit temporary – to prevent glyphosate being removed from shelves from one day to the next, a move which would have had a huge impact on all users, particularly farmers.

While in principle I welcome further complementary studies – as are now being carried out by the European Chemicals Agency to determine whether glyphosate requires reclassification from a safety perspective – I think we need to be careful not to take plant protection products down the same route

as GMOs, whereby there are constant calls for further studies simply as a means to delay authorisation, rather than being genuinely based on concerns over public health.

Europe's farmers are under increasing pressure to improve their performance – both economic and environmental – and this experience with glyphosate has served as a worrying indication of a possible future trend challenging applications for re-authorisation of other active substances.

About the author

Julie Girling (ECR, UK) is a Member of the European Parliament's environment, public health and food safety committee

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