

Another One Should Bite the Dust

Why is the cancer causing Roundup (glyphosate) still being used? We are calling for the weedkiller to be taken off the market by EPA and the states, for people to stop using it and exposing their families, and for cities and town to stop its use on public lands immediately.

Roundup's Got Cancer

As of this writing, it has been six months since the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), a branch of the World Health Organization, announced its finding that one of the world's most popular pesticides is a human cancer causing agent based on laboratory animal studies. IARC doesn't reach this conclusion lightly. As we explain in this issue, prior to IARC's classification of a chemical, 17 experts from 11 countries analyze scientific studies and data for about a year before meeting as a working group to reach a consensus on the chemical's status. The group was chaired by Aaron Blair, Ph.D., who ran that National Cancer Institute's Occupation Studies Branch and is the author of over 450 publications on occupational and environmental causes of cancer.

It is rare that human test data exists on a pesticide (the human data often comes from occupational exposure studies). Without human data on glyphosate, IARC gave the chemical its highest rating possible, a Group 2A probably carcinogenic in humans rating. The causal relationship between exposure and cancer is clear. But, the headlines in newspapers across the country at the time proclaimed that IARC ranked glyphosate a *probable* human carcinogen, and that seemed to blunt the story behind the headline –glyphosate is a potent carcinogen.

The glyphosate story that is playing out now seems repetitious of the many stories of failed U.S. pesticide regulation. A chemical is allowed on the market under a weak federal statute that is administered with deference to the presumed, but unproven, benefits of or need for toxic synthetic chemicals, its market share grows to become intertwined in our lives through dietary and nondietary exposure, it is presumed safe and used widely where children and pets live and play, the data on adverse effects builds for years in obscure scientific journals and conferences, and then the information on hazards emerges in the mainstream press, forcing greater public scrutiny and eventual EPA regulatory movement that facilitates voluntary action by the manufacturer to withdraw the chemical from the market. The manufacturer moves on to the next chemical, leaving victims of cancer, neurological damage, respiratory problems, reproductive dysfunction, and learning disabilities in its wake.

It is a story that demands state and local action, while powerful chemical industry interests threaten regulators with litigation and delays that weigh heavily on the agency. In fact, the company with a special interest, in the case of glyphosate –in this case Monsanto– was able in 1991 to convince EPA to change its cancer classification of glyphosate to insufficient evidence of carcinogenicity.

People and local officials deciding how to manage land, from parks to playing fields, schools to golf courses, roadsides to waterways and surrounding areas feel, at best, unprotected and, at worst, betrayed by EPA. We are watching the glyphosate science unfold, just as we watch the decline of pollinators and see an ineffective or unresponsive EPA. That reality is driving more and more communities to define land management programs that adopt organic practices on their public lands, and, in states where their authority is not usurped by state government, issue restrictions on toxic pesticide use on private lands –due to the poisoning and contamination caused by movement of the chemical off the target site through drift and run-off.

All this comes at a time when glyphosate is no longer working on farms across the U.S. Last fall, the state of Texas, on behalf of farmers of 3 million acres of cotton, asked EPA to allow emergency use of propazine, a triazine herbicide in the same family as atrazine, because even though it is not registered for use on cotton it is thought to work. EPA denied the permit because it said that cumulative exposure to triazines was already above acceptable levels.

So, we call for glyphosate use to stop. We do this at the same time that we advance an organic systems approach to weed management, one that adopts soil-building, cultural, mechanical, ecological, and biological practices that typically make the chemical unnecessary.

Defending organic

The strategy that we are pursuing –an organic strategy solution– offers the best hope for sustainability, with a sound federal law with core principles and standards of sustainability that are unmatched by other laws. The organic law enshrines a definition of sustainable that protects, health, the environment, and biodiversity, and seeks continuous improvement through incentives for the most ecologically sound inputs. A big problem is the agency that administers the law, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Along with a coalition of farm, consumer, environmental and certification groups, we have sued USDA to get its organic program back on track after changing long standing law and process without seeking public hearing and comment. In a decision on another case, a federal court rejected USDA's attempt to block the case from going forward. The judge in the case told the government attorney that it could not change its interpretation of law without public input.

The pace of change is increasing. Roadblocks to change are temporary, as common sense and efforts to avoid unnecessary hazards become the norm in households and towns and cities across the country. Please let us know how we can help as your household and town make the transition to organic.



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