

Glyphosate May Harm Beneficial Organisms

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(ABSTRACT)

Monsanto is the world's major producer of glyphosate (the active ingredient in Roundup), with manufacturing sites in the U.S., Belgium, Malaysia, Brazil and Argentina. For the past several years, sales of Roundup have increased about 20% per year--related in part to growth in the number of acres planted with Roundup Ready crops (crops genetically engineered to be tolerant to Roundup). Preliminary data indicate that approximately 112,000 tons of glyphosate were used worldwide in 1998.

Recently, additional concerns surfaced regarding glyphosate's possible impact on human health. Two Swedish studies found an increased risk of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma linked to exposure to glyphosate. According to Professor Lennart Hardell, the studies' principal investigator, exposure to the herbicide increases the risk of this cancer by a factor of three. While Professor Hardell acknowledges that the sample size (four) in each study is low and that the risks of contracting non-Hodgkins lymphoma are small, he believes the risks are sufficient to warrant extensive additional research.

GLYPHOSATE MAY HARM BENEFICIAL ORGANISMS

Glyphosate may pose a significant risk to various predatory mites and parasitoids, according to a yet-to-be-released European Community (EC) report on the herbicide. Documents submitted to the EC show that even when correctly applied for intended uses, glyphosate may harm beneficial organisms. Because of these potentially significant impacts, widespread use of this broad spectrum herbicide may have adverse consequences for non-target beneficial species and biodiversity.

The detailed report, produced by the German government as part of an extensive review process to determine which pesticides will be allowed for use in the European Union (EU), was completed in December 1998. It is currently being discussed by Member State regulators. The report calls for the decision regarding glyphosate to be postponed pending further studies.

Early next year, regulators and the EU should decide whether glyphosate will be added to the list of approved pesticides. At that time, a report will be released to the public. Since only a handful of pesticides have gone through the review process, individual countries' regulations are currently still in force. Eventually, any pesticides not included on the list will effectively be banned for use across Europe.

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There have also been reports that weeds are becoming resistant to the herbicide. The latest case of glyphosate-resistant ryegrass in Australia has raised some concerns about the possibility of widespread resistance because it occurred even though the farmer was using a rotation system previously thought to be effective in preventing herbicide resistance.

The Pesticides Trust (a United Kingdom NGO) has called for greater transparency in the EC pesticide review proceedings and release of pesticide review documents early in process.

Sources: Agrow: World Crop Protection News, January 29, March 12, and August 27, 1999. "Glyphosate," full transcript, Channel 4 News, UK, October 12, 1999. The Independent, October 12, 1999.

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