

Disagreement over glyphosate continues

The EU has still not made a decision about glyphosate, the active ingredient in a number of herbicides. A crucial ballot in mid-October did not get enough votes, either for or against. At WUR, opinions are also divided.

There has been a ban on the use of glyphosate by consumers since 2017. The question is whether the EU should also ban the chemical for agriculture. The European food authority EFSA does not think the ban is necessary and recommends renewing authorization for another ten years. However, a crucial vote about the ban in mid-October did not get the required qualified majority, either for or against. Now the appeals board of the Standing Committee on Plants, Animals, Food and Feed (SCoPAFF) has been saddled with the controversial issue. If again there is no majority representing at least 65 per cent of the EU population, it will be up to the European Commission to decide.

No consensus

The Netherlands abstained, despite a motion from Parliament asking caretaker minister Adema to vote against renewal. His decision came from 'weighing up scientific recommendations and concerns within society', he said.

But the scientific recommendations are not unanimous. At WUR too, there is only consensus about the principle that use should be reduced as much as possible. Opinions are divided about the definition of that: what use is acceptable, and up to when?

Richard Harrison (director of the Plant Sciences Group) and Pieter de Wolf (farming researcher) are against a total ban for fear that the alternatives are worse. 'We understand the concerns around glyphosate and think they must be investigated

carefully. However, we fear that a blanket European ban will backfire, for people and the environment, and for soil organisms and the climate. And we sincerely wonder if everyone is sufficiently aware of this,' they wrote in an opinion article in de Volkskrant newspaper. That view is also echoed in the scientific perspective that Harrison drafted for the Dutch Parliament. 'A complete ban (...) will make growers

'We fear that a blanket European ban will backfire'

therefore be used more intensively. This achieves the opposite of what we want as a society, which is for less pesticide to be used.'

Precautionary

Violette Geissen (professor of Soil Physics and Land Management) called a renewal 'not a good idea' back in 2017. She is still very critical and claims the renewal 'contradicts the precautionary principle'.

switch to other existing chemical alternatives, which are agriculturally less effective and will

She says important exposure routes and risks are not included in the EU assessment. Geissen also discovered early this year that glyphosate is the substance most commonly found, and in the largest amounts, in the Dutch samples of the SPRINT study. The study looks at ten European countries, plus Argentina, and measures what pesticide residues are found in the environment, animals and people and in what quantities. In her scientific reflection for the Dutch Parliament she argued that 'the risk glyphosate poses to human health and ecosystems cannot be estimated and therefore the precautionary principle should apply.'

The EU must make a decision by 14 December at the latest; the European approval of glyphosate expires on 15 December 2023. ME



Quite apart from the European debate, Agriculture minister Piet Adema wants to ban glyphosate as of 2025 anyway for spraying grassland, catch crops and green manure • Photo Shutterstock