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We are pissed off!

MEPs test positive for glyphosate



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Last month, the Green group in the European Parliament took the initiative of inviting colleague MEPs to have their urine tested for residues of the herbicide glyphosate. The action was launched during the week of the plenary vote on a strong resolution opposing the renewal of the license for glyphosate, the controversial weedkiller we've been campaigning to ban. A cross-party group of 48 MEPs from 13 member states took part, and the results are now in. The Biocheck lab in Leipzig that carried out the 'Elisa test' concluded: "**All participants excreted glyphosate by urine.** This means that glyphosate could be also a health problem of EU-parliament members." The results of this symbolic action demonstrate just how omnipresent this suspected carcinogenic substance is in our lives. No matter your age, sex, or lifestyle, everyone is exposed to this substance. Glyphosate is literally everywhere - in our environment, our food, our beer, our wine and also in our bodies. And that's why it's lurking in our elected representatives' urine. On average, the MEPs had 1.7 micrograms/litre of glyphosate in their urine, **17 times higher than the European drinking water norm** (0.1 microgram/litre). This means that everyone we tested was way above the limit for residues of pesticides in drinking water. The idea for this project is based on a similar study in Germany, made public by the Heinrich Böll Foundation. The study, “Urinale 2015”, was the

largest survey worldwide on the contamination of the population with glyphosate, and was carried out throughout winter 2015/16 in Germany. With samples from over 2000 participants, the study found that the scale of the glyphosate problem is enormous, with detected concentrations in urine between five and 42 times over the maximum value of residues for drinking water in Europe. No less than 99.6% of all citizens who took part in this survey had higher residue levels. This means that virtually all citizens are contaminated with glyphosate. The values of children and younger age groups were double those of seniors. Consumers of organic food had an average measure of 0.9 micrograms/litre, almost as highly contaminated as consumers of conventional food, who had average results of 1.2 micrograms/l.

Unhealthy stuff

In March 2015, the International Agency for Research of Cancer (IARC) of the World Health Organisation (WHO) classified glyphosate as “probably carcinogenic to humans”. It was placed in "Group 2A" based on:

- “limited evidence” of cancer in humans (from real-world exposures that actually occurred),
- “sufficient evidence” of cancer in experimental animals (from studies of “pure” glyphosate) as well as other animals.
- “strong evidence” of mechanistic information related to carcinogenicity (for genotoxicity and oxidative stress) both for “pure” glyphosate and for glyphosate formulations.

But because the glyphosate approval expires at the end of June 2016, the EU needs to re-evaluate the herbicide to decide to grant a new approval or not. The EU pesticide regulation requires the following for such a re-approval:

- the company/companies have to make a submission - this was done in 2012 by 23 companies joining forces under the title of the Glyphosate Task Force, submitting a joint application for the renewal of glyphosate
- A rapporteur Member State to make a draft risk assessment - this was completed by BfR, the German authority for risk evaluation)
- The European Food Safety Authority to undertake a peer review of the draft risk assessment - this was published in November 2015.
- The European Commission to take a decision based on EFSA's peer review, the legal precautionary principle and other legitimate factors.

What is important to know is that the EU Pesticide regulation à priori disqualifies active substances that are carcinogens category 1A or 1B from approval. Now, the criteria used by IARC for Group 2A are comparable to those of Category 1B in the EU law. But EFSA however considered that it is unlikely that glyphosate poses a carcinogenic hazard. This, and the secrecy about certain studies that EFSA used, as well as the possible conflicts of interest of many experts that EFSA consulted, has led to a major scientific standoff between WHO/IARC and EFSA. The European Commission, in its latest proposal on which the member states will vote on May 19, does not take into account this controversy, the huge public engagement in this issue, or the resolution voted by the European Parliament. It is hugely irresponsible to want to prolong the authorisation of glyphosate for nine more years.

Cleaning stuff?

Glyphosate was originally invented as a means of softening water in order to clean pipes and drains. Only later was it detected that it is highly effective in blocking the synthesis of an enzyme in plant cells that then causes them to starve and die. This is also true for all cells which need the same enzyme in order to grow, such as algae, bacteria, and fungi. A huge population of bacteria and fungi live on the skin as well as inside the human body. They are essential for our body's health, e.g. by enabling digestion or preventing

infections. So, the antibacterial effect of glyphosate gives reasons to fear that intake of this toxin (and its degradation product AMPA) into the human body damages human health. Also, the glyphosate molecule strongly attaches to certain minerals, among them magnesium, calcium, zinc, cobalt, manganese, iron. This helps to bind glyphosate to the clay minerals in the soil – and it does so in the human body as well, making these elements unavailable for the immune system and thereby disrupting the capacity of the body to maintain a condition of balance within its internal environment, even when faced with external changes. As long as there is no generally accepted knowledge about the toxicity of glyphosate and its long term effects on the human health, we don't want this substance in our body. It should be banned from its widespread use. But the contrary is happening. Its use around the world keeps increasing, especially due to its link to genetically engineered glyphosate-tolerant crops. Since the introduction of “Roundup Ready” in 1996, glyphosate use has increased 15-fold. In 2014, global use was 825,000 tonnes of which 76% was for agricultural use and 24% non-agricultural uses (e.g. public gardens, railways, private gardens). **What is the alternative?** For the Greens, glyphosate is the very incarnation of "modern agriculture". This model is not sustainable at all, because:

- it stands for reckless monoculture: a non-selective herbicide - a broad band killer which kills all plants, algae, bacteria and fungi - is used to deal with a few pests, thereby creating massive effects on non-target organisms and biodiversity
- it is strongly linked to GMOs (56% of global use is for glyphosate resistant crops), killing everything but the genetically engineered crop
- it stands for economic gains at all costs
- it has replaced traditional agricultural practices such as tilling because spraying glyphosate is cheaper ("chemical plough")
- it is used not only to kill unwanted weeds, but also the crop itself prior to harvest to accelerate ripening and facilitate harvest ("desiccation")

So if glyphosate is the symbol of intensive agriculture, we must turn away from it. And we can! There are many safer alternatives that do not require pesticides to get rid of weeds, pesticides which in turn prevent the proper development of crops. This agricultural model must eventually be abandoned as it attracts parasites and forced farmers to use pesticides that can damage their health. The real alternative involves not only a change of product, but a paradigm shift. The agriculture of the future must work with nature, not against it. It should respect biodiversity and a wide variety of cultures. Research shows that when farmers adopt methods based on agroecology there are multiple benefits for the environment and for crops, e.g. less vulnerability to diseases and weeds resulting in reduced use of chemical inputs such as glyphosate or other synthetic pesticides. Agroecological practices allow better resistance to flooding as well as drought. What's more, these environment-friendly methods are economically sustainable and are sufficiently productive to provide enough food for all. **How to apply alternatives?** We must first change the perceptions of what we consider to be 'weeds'. Weeds are part of biodiversity, and are not "bad" per se. Weeds are simply "plants located in the wrong place." In agriculture, they compete with crops used for resources (nutrients, water, space), and that is the problem. For example, if weeds move paving stones or cause other problems in the infrastructure, they can cause problems in terms of urban development. But weeds cannot be eradicated completely. Eradication is an illusion in nature: the ecological niche occupied by the plant will be eradicated soon and occupied by another. There are alternatives that don't resort to synthetic chemistry.

- In gardening, it is possible to reconsider the spatial planning by mulching, using wood chip coverage, or using covering plants that will take up the space that weeds could occupy. Such practices have other advantages over spraying with chemicals; they maintain the healthy and living soil which will remain productive in the long-term, which is not the case with synthetic pesticides.
- Crop rotations can also be planned to reduce the phenomenon of flooding, shifting the sowing period or practicing stale seedbed.
- On small surfaces, weeds can be removed manually (brushing, hoeing, sweeping).

- Weeding can also be achieved through thermal weed killers such as steam or boiling water, or organic weed killer can be used.
- On large surfaces, these alternative techniques may require the use of specific machines (e.g. rotary hoes) combined with appropriate training of farmers.

So, it is possible to produce enough food for all without glyphosate. Alternatives exist! However, in its latest proposal that will be voted next week (19th May) the Commission ploughs ahead with a full-fledged approval of glyphosate's license for nine years. It considers only symbolically if at all the European Parliament's resolution calling for a very limited scope of approval. Responsibility for the protection of operators and for multiple risks is discharged onto Member States in a non-legally binding manner. We are pissed off that our governments want to allow this poison for another nine years! No politician should have this in his or her body, and not a single citizen either!

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