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World Cancer day

Glyphosate resistant GMOs enter the EU without member states' validation

In 2015, the International Agency for Research on Cancer published its conclusions on glyphosate, classifying it as "probably carcinogenic for humans". This opinion triggered a heated international scientific debate on the matter, which has still not been resolved.

This, and other considerations pushed by diverse stakeholders has led the EU member states to *not approve the renewal of the glyphosate authorization for use in the EU*. The European Commission has had to resort to a "technical extension" of the authorisation for 18 months, while the European Chemical Agency is preparing a new opinion to assist the lawmakers.

Interestingly, within the same period, 23 new glyphosate tolerant GM plants– which are designed to be dosed with glyphosate in the field– have been authorized for use in food and feed in the European Union, and 15 new glyphosate tolerant GM maize varieties are currently on the table for discussion. So, does that mean the member states are completely schizophrenic, not coming to an agreement when it comes to renewing glyphosate for health concerns, but allowing food and feed, which they know contains glyphosate, on the market?

Well, not really, as the member states did not actually allow these GM plants. In all 23 cases, the "Standing Committee on Plants, Animals, Food and Feed" was unable to reach a conclusion - as was the case for the glyphosate authorization– but the Commission went ahead with the authorizations anyway.

This may seem a bit undemocratic already, but it is even worse. To go through with these authorization, the Commission also ignored the repeated objections voted by the European Parliement since December 2015, and of course the simple fact that a majority of EU citizens are against.



The lack of democracy of this procedure is a conclusion that is even shared by the European Commission itself, as clarified in a report from 2016, and in numerous oral interventions from its president, Jean-Claude Juncker. On 1 February 2017, Vice-President Timmermans proposed some scenarios for changing the rules to avoid running into this situation again to the College of Commissioners. This is a very good– though late– initiative, if it actually leads to a better representation of the opinion of a majority of citizens on GMO issues.

One of the solutions would be to ask that a qualified majority of member states approve a new GM plant for it to be allowed, meaning that the abstentions of “coward” countries would stop playing in favour of these products.

In the meantime, while the glyphosate question and the procedural problem are being sorted out, we cannot understand why GM plants, and especially glyphosate resistant ones, continue to arrive on the standing committee table and be allowed into our food and feed without any form of political validation.

On World cancer day, we have to ask what is of more value to EU lawmakers: the battle against cancer and its root causes or the growing multi-billion trade in glyphosate? With “business as usual” policies, the global glyphosate market is expected to grow further with an average of 6.5% between 2013 and 2019 (1,111.4 kilotons) with a total value of EUR 8 billion. That is a lot of money. However, the economic costs of 700 chemical substances with endocrine disrupting effects, of which glyphosate is one, are estimated at EUR 157 billion per year. Not to mention the human costs... Cost-benefit analysis, anyone?

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