

United Nations health, agriculture and food experts confirm safety of common herbicide

By Mark Ross

Glyphosate remains safe for farmers, the public and the environment when used according to label instructions, despite recent discussions about the herbicide.

Glyphosate is widely used in New Zealand by farmers, land managers and consumers. Regional councils use it because it offers effective and safe weed control, has low-volatility and degrades quickly in soil. The herbicide has recorded over 40 years of safe use and been the subject of over 800 studies, all of which confirmed its safety. It continues to be rigorously tested by regulators in New Zealand and throughout the world, with more than 160 countries approving its safe use.

Those with common-sense know that herbicides are not products that you consume directly. They should be used precisely, with caution and following manufacturers' instructions.

The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC)'s classification of glyphosate last year received a lot of attention, but was misleading. The IARC report is not a risk assessment - it refers specifically to the active chemical. It does not suggest the use of glyphosate products according to their registered use poses any threat. Actual risk is determined by the type and extent of human exposure.

IARC classifies substances using terms such as "possibly" or "probably" carcinogenic to define the potential hazard of a substance. A number of everyday products including coffee, aloe vera and talcum powder were categorised by the agency as "possibly carcinogenic".

Dozens of scientific studies were ignored – specifically genetic toxicity studies – which conclude that glyphosate is not a human health risk.

The resulting concern over the use of glyphosate is simply not justified.

Chemical products such as glyphosate are among the most highly regulated in the world. Regulatory and scientific authorities worldwide have concluded that glyphosate, when used according to label directions, does not pose an unreasonable risk to human health, the environment, or pets.

Three of the four programmes within the World Health Organisation have also reviewed the safety of glyphosate; all concluded that when used appropriately it is safe for human health and the environment.

The glyphosate classification contradicted conclusions of the expert body of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO) - IARC's parent body - which found the substance was "unlikely to pose a carcinogenic risk to humans". Earlier this month the FAO and the WHO confirmed that "glyphosate was unlikely to pose a carcinogenic risk to humans from exposure through the diet" as well.

In January a comprehensive, multiyear safety review was completed as part of the European Union's renewal of approval for glyphosate. The European Food Safety Authority concluded it was unlikely to pose a carcinogenic risk in humans.

Well-respected internal regulatory agencies in Canada, Germany and the United States have also approved the safety of this product.

The New Zealand Environmental Protection Authority is actively monitoring the status of glyphosate as well.

Conclusions about a matter as important as our health must be non-biased, thorough and based on quality science that adheres to internationally recognised standards.

Care is still needed when using crop protection products as well as many other everyday substances. It is important to use them according to label directions - keep them out of the reach of children, avoid spray drift and wear the correct protective equipment.

Anyone wishing to know more about glyphosate should review the conclusions reached by regulatory authorities in developed countries that rigorously consider all available data, published and unpublished, in a comprehensive evaluation.

- Mark Ross is chief executive of Agcarm, the industry association for companies which manufacture and distribute crop protection and animal health products.