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Is it Safe to Use Roundup?

Glyphosate, the active ingredient in Roundup made headlines last week when the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), an arm of the World Health Organization, departed from the scientific consensus to declare glyphosate to be a class 2A “probable human carcinogen.” With the speed of the internet and the reach of social media, the spin began on both sides. Consumers wondered if it was safe to eat food on which glyphosate had been used, and farmers worried about being sued if they kept using the product. Historical perspective, science, and common sense were left in the dust as the rhetoric spun out of control. So setting aside the posturing, here are a few things to consider as you make up your mind on this issue.

First, glyphosate has undergone testing and scientific study for more than 30 years. The U.S. government has declared the chemical safe for use on crops and in agricultural production. The standards used by the government are as follows: “The U.S. EPA develops strict limits (or tolerances) for residues at 100 to 1,000 times lower than levels are at which health impacts might occur. These tolerance levels are considered safe based on average daily food intake by adults and children.” Those opposed to biotechnology or the use of almost any agricultural chemical say these standards are not safe. “It is the amount of exposure to a chemical that determines the potential for harm, not simply its presence or absence,” said Carl Winter, PhD, UC Davis. Levels

1,000 times lower than needed seems reasonable to both scientists and regulators. In addition, no credible evidence of health problems have been documented over the past 3 decades.

Second, consider the fact that the ARC study is just one study compared to a much larger body of work that has drawn a different conclusion. “Scientific experts who have considered the body of relevant research do not agree with a categorization of glyphosate as carcinogenic for a very simple reason – it’s clearly not. There is nothing in the data to support such claims, and nothing in the deep reservoir of real world experience with glyphosate, to justify such a move,” said L. Val Giddings, with the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation. He also points out that the ARC study does not present any new research, but bases its conclusion on previously released research. Whether you believe the new study or not, keep in mind that, to date, the vast amount of science is on the side of glyphosate safety.

Should farmers stop using glyphosate? The Organic Consumer Association says yes. In a statement released just moments after the ARC results were made public, they said, “The OCA calls on the U.S. EPA to do its job: Ban glyphosate now.” I do find it interesting that the same groups that say 30 years of testing on GMO food is not enough to prove their safety are calling for a ban on glyphosate based on one report.

As for farmers ready to head to the fields to plant a new crop, should they be worried about using glyphosate? Could they be sued or caught in a class action suit? Todd Janzen, ag law expert for Hoosier Ag Today, says no, “Nothing has changed with respect to EPA approval of glyphosate. All we have is one organization classifying it as something that ‘probably’ is carcinogenic.”

So, as you sort through the mountains of media coverage and the megabytes of comments on social media, keep this in mind: As of today, glyphosate is safe to use on crops, and food from those crops poses no risk to your health.