

Genetic Literacy Project

SCIENCE NOT IDEOLOGY

US funding for cancer agency threatened over handling of controversial glyphosate report

[Joe Scott](#) | [Genetic Literacy Project](#) | December 19, 2017



Three US House Science, Space, and Technology Committee leaders are threatening to cut funding for the International Agency for Research on Cancer over concerns about the agency's scientific integrity and conflicts of interest.

In a [December letter](#) to outgoing IARC Director Christopher Wild, Chairman Lamar Smith, Vice Chairman Frank Lucas, and Environment Subcommittee Chairman Andy Biggs reiterated the

committee's request for witnesses to testify at a hearing regarding "data deletion, manipulation and potential conflicts of interest" in IARC's designation of glyphosate as a probable carcinogen. Wild, who is leaving his post in January 2019, dismissed an earlier request.

A committee aide said the letter targets withholding funds for IARC's monograph program and not IARC in general. The US provided about \$925,000 in 2017 for the program. US contributions to the program totaled \$22 million since 1985. Funding from the US makes up about 7.4 percent of IARC's budget from participating nations, which makes up about two-thirds of its total budget. The remaining third comes from grants, private and international partner donations.

Part of the committee's concern is that Christopher Portier had input into the glyphosate monograph despite apparent conflicts of interest. Portier worked for the Environmental Defense Fund, an environmental NGO that has periodically campaigned against pesticide use. [Media reports](#) indicate Portier also received at least \$160,000 as a consultant for attorneys suing Monsanto on behalf of cancer clients. Portier reportedly signed contracts with the law firms days after IARC issued its controversial monograph proclaiming glyphosate to be a probably carcinogen.



IARC Director Christopher Wild

The congressmen disputed Wild's assertions that IARC's monographs are "free from vested interests" and that Christopher Portier had no part in drafting or interpreting IARC evaluations on glyphosate.

“The Committee finds it difficult to view Portier’s view with EDF and his role on the glyphosate monograph as anything but a conflict of interest,” the committee said in the letter.

Changed assessment

In October, [Reuters’ Kate Kelland reported](#) that IARC removed “multiple scientists’ conclusions that their studies had found no link between glyphosate and cancer in laboratory animals” and inserted another statistical analysis that reversed the study’s original finding. Kelland reported the substitution reversed the monograph’s conclusion.

Wild defended the monograph process, writing:

...changes made to draft documents are the result of deliberation between Working Group members and for this reason are not attributable to any particular scientist. For all Monograph evaluations, drafts prepared over the months prior to a meeting form the basis of an open and detailed scientific debate during the eight-day meeting in Lyon and are modified by the working group as a result. The final Monograph evaluation represents the scientific consensus of the whole Working Group and does not have individually authored sections.

The US lawmakers also questioned Wild’s argument that Portier was not involved in the changes.

Emails demonstrate that Portier was involved with Working Group authors discussing the drafting of the glyphosate monograph. Additionally, Portier was active in developing responses to the European Food Safety Authority’s (EFSA) assessment on glyphosate, thus influencing the interpretation.

Committee members also contend that Portier “was the mastermind behind a letter” lobbying to reject the EFSA’s glyphosate findings. The letter was signed by scientists who worked on the glyphosate monograph.

“They’re exploiting outmoded, outdated science for a political agenda. People like (French President Emmanuel) Macron use politicized science to appease their left-wing supporters, said food policy writer Julie Kelly, who follows this issue closely.

[Macron has vowed](#) to ban glyphosate use in France within three years.

Last summer, California’s Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment added glyphosate to its list of carcinogenic agents based solely on IARC’s assessment.

‘Follow the money’

Tim Pastoor who is a consultant for the agricultural biotech and seed industry and a toxicologist retired from Syngenta, recently [co-authored a paper](#) that claimed that IARC's methods for determining whether a substance is carcinogenic are hopelessly outdated, relying on systems developed in the 1960s and 1970s while ignoring decades of cancer research since that time. "IARC has gone the way of the rotary phone," Pastoor said. He said rather than consider the importance of dosage and exposure in determining whether a substance is carcinogenic, IARC labels them as either carcinogenic or not carcinogenic, leading to the agency placing eating red meat in the same category as smoking tobacco. Why would the agency cling to such an outmoded system?

"Follow the money. There's a ton of money riding on plaintiff's cases that are made more credible by IARC's findings."

Last spring, CNN reported that more than 800 cancer patients sued Monsanto, claiming glyphosate gave them cancer.

"If there's no glyphosate monograph, there are no lawsuits," said Kelly, the National Review contributor.

She suggested the committee's next step could be to subpoena US citizens involved in the IARC's glyphosate assessment, including Portier.

Although the congressional committee doesn't have direct control over the budget, it could make a recommendation to the House Budget Committee to withhold funding for 2018.

Pastoor said he supports cutting funds to IARC. "My view is that \$22 million is a lot of money to be going overseas if it's going to outmoded, outdated methods of science evaluation.

He also suggested that science groups should get more involved:

It's high time for scientists who care about how these changes are being made to step forward and speak their mind about how these decisions are being made. Small groups of very vocal people like Chris Portier are stealing the show and taking advantage of their positions to hijack the cancer evaluation process.

Joe Scott is a freelance agricultural writer. He was an editor with [Patch.com](#) and wrote for St. Louis Suburban Journals for 10 years, where he was, for a time, editor of the Warrenton Journal, where he wrote on agricultural among other topics. Twitter: @joescott44