

Genetic Literacy Project

SCIENCE NOT IDEOLOGY

Viewpoint: Anti-biotech groups' master plan substitutes 'citizen science' for data in quest to get glyphosate banned

[David Zaruk](#) | [Genetic Literacy Project](#) | November 29, 2017

This week we celebrate a hollow victory. The European Union renewed its authorisation of glyphosate for five years. The science was clearer than clear – the herbicide is one of the safest substances on the market. All but one research or regulatory agency gave glyphosate an unequivocal approval (and that one, IARC, was seriously conflicted and corrupted). For 40 years farmers have relied on glyphosate (off-patent, inexpensive and effective), giving them the means now to develop sustainable farming with no-till and complex cover cropping. Glyphosate is indeed the herbicide of the century and the very thought of banning it seems absurd.

So why couldn't the European Commission renew glyphosate for 15 years as originally planned? As the science was clear, then the regulatory risk assessment process should have been simple. But it was never about the science, facts or data. It was never about the benefits to farmers, the environment and consumers. It was about something much larger.

The European Commission was dragged through regulatory hell for 30 months on this dossier for many reasons and it had better clean up its process. While glyphosate may have been a regulatory watershed, it has become a benchmark for the zealots to push harder on the coming policy dossiers. The Commission survived this Age of Stupid exercise, just barely, but the activists have a larger strategy in place and this process has pushed them closer to their goal.

What did the zealots really want?

Destroy the EU regulatory risk assessment process



The EU regulatory risk assessment process is meant to be evidence-based. It relies on a gathering of all available research data and scientific advice to allow for a clear decision based on science (usually via committees). Where data is insufficient, the industries involved with the substance or technology need to provide or produce further data. If a new drone technology is developed, for example, in order for the manufacturers to put the product on the market, they would need to provide the relevant European Commission research agency with the required data to properly advise the European Commission on how to manage the risks. If there is insufficient data or the evidence is questionable, the risk assessment agency may reject the authorisation and advise for precaution.

In the case of the risk assessment process for chemicals and pesticides, producers need to regularly provide data and produce evidence to keep existing substances on the market and mountains of research (in many cases, over 10,000 pages of data requirements) to register new substances. The burden of proof is on companies to prove that the product is safe. Industry follows GLP – good laboratory practice – a series of quality practices to ensure that all research is reproducible, consistent and uniform. The role of the regulator is to ensure the data provided is correct, consistent and without data gaps. The research cost burden is put on industry – in most cases they have the best scientists and the most advanced technology – as they stand to benefit from the introduction of their innovations.

With glyphosate, the activists claim that the forty years of data provided by industry and the 3300 studies could not be trusted, quite simply because there was one company involved, Monsanto, which has become the source of their irrational rage. In the Age of Stupid, that seemed to be enough to want to scrap the entire European risk assessment system. I can't believe, in an intelligence-based society, I actually wrote this paragraph.



This absolutely ridiculous argument has been propagated by anti-industry opportunists like Martin Pigeon, Marie-Monique Robin and Carey Gillam who all share an unhealthy obsession against Monsanto. What's outrageous is that the scientist Pigeon and Gillam cooperated with, Christopher Portier, was secretly being paid by law firms who would profit nicely from lawsuits against Monsanto should this triad of trepidation succeed in trashing the European risk assessment process. That they knew about the conflicting interests of the law firms to create doubt and anti-Monsanto sentiment, and continued to work with these non-transparent predatory lawyers, speaks volumes about their lack of moral character. If they had succeeded in destroying the EU regulatory risk assessment process, what would these zealots have proposed instead?

Institutionalize a citizen-science risk assessment process

Activists like Pigeon call for the present risk assessment process to be reformed by excluding all industry research. This is in line with IARC's monograph policy that pretends to reject considering non-published data, but this irrational distrust of industry creates severe limits on data and evidence. How would this lack of expertise be addressed?

I hear groups like CEO, PAN and Friends of the Earth often talking about expanding publicly-funded research. This is naive since the taxpayer should not have to pay for the costs to guarantee their safety. So I then hear claims that industry should pay the regulatory agencies to conduct the research. Of course if industry is paying for the punch-bowl, they should have a say on which scientists should be involved in these studies. Well, that's where we are now and I suspect Saint Martin would have a hard time accepting that.

What these eco-fundamentalist groups want, ultimately, is an increased role for citizen science (crowd-sourced or community-led science). While there is nothing wrong with the public being involved in the scientific process, having citizens and non-experts leading the research is somewhat troubling to those wanting evidence-based policy decisions. Citizen science is what Jackie McGlade, the disgraced former head of the European Environment Agency, now the chief scientist (???) at UNEP, is arguing for. But what is citizen science about?

Smartphone technology may allow apps for amateur bird watchers to better record sightings but such cases of citizen science is random and anecdotal ... hardly the quality to base responsible regulations on given the calibre of today's research technology. There is no "good laboratory practice" with volunteers of amateur activists testing water or crowd-sourcing data and samples for groups subject to bias and crowd-led campaigns.

Citizen science assumes the rejection of the superior knowledge of the expert. They feel experts are biased either by funding or a post-modern dependence on some paradigm which may not be certain (and thus not valid). So for these new-age enlightened campaigners, the expert's contribution to such debates is not worth very much. When you hear people moaning about today's decision to renew glyphosate, many of them are saying this was undemocratic, and the people, the citizens, want the herbicide banned. So in a democracy, the people know more than the toxicologists, chemists, plant-biologists and agronomists on the safety of glyphosate.

This is literally insane! Would we reject the pilot or the aviation mechanic and trust a randomly chosen volunteer to fly my airplane simply because he or she has no affiliation with an airline? Would we let a democratically-selected activist operate on my liver? Yet environmentalists and naturopaths are demanding the citizens' voice take the lead on agriculture, food production and pharmaceutical decisions. How did they get so jaded?

Indeed, even the leading scientist for the anti-glyphosate "people's movement", Christopher Portier, a statistician, admitted he knew nothing about glyphosate before attending the IARC expert panel that started this whole sordid affair. Who needs experts today when everyone has

PhDs from Google University? Chris could figure out how to link glyphosate to cancer during that week in Lyon, and spend the next two years being the activists' darling in the campaign to screw Monsanto, science, farmers and consumers. And hey Chris, the money was good!

So in the zealots' warped world, citizen science, as the base of a new European regulatory risk assessment process, will see activist campaigners heading EU advisory panels with a select group of organic hobby farmers randomly counting bees or earthworms while industry research is excluded and university toxicologists and plant biologists sidelined. This is pure madness. The activists' objective is to ban all agri-technology so they really don't care about the consequences. Only in the Age of Stupid.

With glyphosate, despite the obvious evidence of the experts, despite the environmental benefits, despite the overwhelming value to farmers compared to alternatives, these activist zealots came within a hair's breadth of achieving their goal to discredit research and undermine the European risk assessment process. They used relentless social media fear campaigns, victim-mongering, personal bully attacks on scientists and science communicators, open fabrication, innuendo and deception. And these little liars will do it again and again until they achieve this goal.



A perfect storm of interests

Clearly the activists had the perfect storm with glyphosate. So many other interests collided over the last two years, with new trans-Atlantic partnerships of vile opportunists and silos of slime forming into armies of intolerance, including:

- Anti-GMO American carpetbaggers salivating at removing the chief motivation for farmers to benefit from Roundup-Ready maize and soy by manipulating the European precautionary handicap.
- American class-action lawyers seeking to exploit the EU's hazard-based regulatory approach to create a confusion over the safety of public health exposure to profit from lawsuits against industry.
- Anti-industry activist groups from both sides of the Atlantic have united flush with funds from the burgeoning organic food industry lobby seeking to incapacitate conventional farming and create market-friendly conditions for their unsustainable agricultural production process.
- An alarming scientific ignorance at the heart of the European Commission. Many of the activist groups involved in pushing their anti-evidence agenda were involved in removing the post of EU Chief Scientific Adviser just three years ago.
- Agroecologists have been pining to return Europe to a pre-industrial Malthusian paradise, and banning the use of agri-technology was their first important step. Having their lunatics in charge of the European risk assessment process would have been the icing on the cake! Not just yet.

These zealots will live to fight again, stronger, emboldened and convinced of their righteousness. The present European Commission will be unable to resist their next wave of emotional manipulation and deliberate deception.

This week I will be in Germany to speak at a conference on endocrine disrupting chemicals. There will be zealots in the room. I do not plan to hold back any punches.

The battle continues.

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