

Glyphosate a political football in New Brunswick | The Chronicle Herald

Contributed

It seems the danger of glyphosate may be directly related to the number of seats held in the legislature.

Glyphosate is the active ingredient in VistionMax, the herbicide sprayed extensively on woodland in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick as a vegetation management tool.

Brian Gallant, the Liberal premier of New Brunswick for the past four years, used to espouse the glyphosate-is-safe position put forth by the chief public health officers of both provinces.

"When it comes to the use of glyphosate, the province makes decisions based on the best available evidence," Gallant responded in 2016 when questioned about glyphosate by the Council of Canadians on an open line Moncton radio show.

"The evidence before us is that Health Canada says that, for the time being, that it (the spraying) can continue and that will continue to be the position of the government, barring that it would change."

And change, at least slightly, it did when Gallant picked up only 21 of the province's 49 seats in the Sept. 24 provincial election. Gallant fell short of a majority and gained one fewer seat than did the Progressive Conservatives under leader Brian Blaine. The Green party and the Peoples Alliance of New Brunswick each won three seats.

Clinging precariously to power, Gallant's Liberals delivered a throne speech last week that opened the door to a moratorium on glyphosate spraying. The speech said a Gallant government would consider "whether to recommend a phased-in ban of the use of herbicides such as glyphosate, based on objective evidence."

To maintain power, the fragile Gallant government would require support from both the Greens and the Peoples Alliance. Those two parties advocate a ban on glyphosate.

"They phrased it in such a nuanced way that we have no confidence that it is actually going to lead to a ban on spraying," Shannon Carmont, the acting chief of staff for the Green party of New Brunswick, said of the Liberals' promise.

"If he was serious about it, he would have said he'd put a moratorium on the use of glyphosate."

Carmont said the throne speech debate and a non-confidence vote will be held on Friday.

Jim Bickerton, a political science professor at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, said changing course is nothing new for politicians.

"Pragmatism and compromise rule the day in minority or coalition situations, and there's nothing wrong with that," Bickerton said in an emailed response. "There is no particular ethical question raised by this, unless one thinks that shifting political positions is some

kind of abdication of principle that constitutes an ethical breach. In which case, one shouldn't be involved in party or legislative politics."

Lenore Zann, the environment critic for the Nova Scotia New Democrats and a longtime opponent of glyphosate spraying, said governments have to come to terms with the dangers imposed by glyphosate.

"It is a pity he didn't come to this epiphany earlier since most of the forests of New Brunswick have been sprayed regularly with glyphosate," Zann said of Gallant. "I have been told that research shows that there has been a rise in non-Hodgins Lymphoma disease in New Brunswick, which is the same disease that the man in America took Monsanto to court for."

A California jury decided earlier this year that Monsanto, the giant herbicide company that produces Roundup and VisionMax, must pay a former groundskeeper with terminal non-Hodgkin lymphoma \$289 million in damages for failing to warn him of glyphosate's cancer risks. Dewayne Johnson, the plaintiff, testified that he sprayed large amounts of weed killer on the job and was accidentally doused with the product on two occasions.

"The NDP here in Nova Scotia have been saying for some time that governments need to re-look at whether glyphosate is safe to spray on our forests, safe for the people who do the work and safe for the people who are living around the areas that are getting sprayed and also safe in the sense that it is being ingested by animals that are then in turn hunted and put on the dinner table by unsuspecting people."

The Environment Department gave its OK earlier this year for several companies to spray herbicide on more than 2,000 hectares of privately owned Nova Scotia woodland.

A spokeswoman for the Environment Department said any pesticides used in the province must be registered through Health Canada's Pest Management Regulatory Agency.

"This federal agency determines whether a product is safe for use," said Adele Poirier. "All 10 provinces currently allow pesticide spraying."

She said the department is responsible for issuing approvals for ground and aerial pesticide spraying. Approvals contain specific terms that must be complied with, such as maintaining separation distances from dwellings, providing notifications to the public about spray times and requirements for storing and handling the products.

Dr. Robert Strang, Nova Scotia's chief public health officer, responded to glyphosate concerns in September 2016.

"There is no evidence that glyphosate creates a risk to human health if used properly and if the Department of Environment is monitoring where, how, and when it is used," Strang said in a statement. "Even water can be toxic if too much is consumed in a short period of time.

"While the World Health Organization has identified glyphosate as a probable human carcinogen under certain conditions and exposure, Health Canada has confirmed that glyphosate is not a risk to human health when properly applied."

Northern Pulp, the company that runs the Pictou County mill in Abercrombie Point, received the lion's share of Nova Scotia spray approvals.

"Glyphosate is one of the most extensively studied herbicides," company spokeswoman Kathy Cloutier said in August. "We trust those scientists that deem it safe and we will continue to use it as a product that is recommended for this purpose."

The purpose is to cull hardwood from woodland stands to allow the unimpeded growth of coniferous softwood that the Pictou County mill uses to produce kraft pulp.

Cloutier said Northern Pulp uses 2.8 litres of VisionMax per hectare in highly monitored sprays.