

Health Canada doubles down on glyphosate cancer fight

By [Carl Meyer](#) & [Alastair Sharp](#) in [News](#), [Politics](#) | January 11th 2019



Health Minister Ginette Petitpas Taylor speaks to media outside the House of Commons in Ottawa on June 20, 2018.

Health Canada has rejected allegations that a key ingredient in a popular pesticide is a cancer risk to humans based on typical use.

The department announced Friday it had decided to stick with its decision in 2017 to approve the use of the ingredient, glyphosate, for 15 years. The result led to accusations from environmental groups that federal oversight of public health had eroded.

Health Canada says it underwent a "thorough scientific review" of its approval of a key ingredient in a popular pesticide, and won't overturn its decision despite concerns its regulator is "ignoring" potential human health impacts

The department said in a statement that it underwent a "thorough scientific review" of its 2017 decision, including examining "numerous individual studies and raw scientific data" as well as "additional cancer and genotoxicity studies," and concluded that its "final decision will stand."

Concern that regulator 'ignoring' potential impacts

Glyphosate, the most widely-used weed-killer in Canada, is sprayed on major food crops like corn, soy and wheat. It is also used in forestry and land management, to kill undergrowth.

Tests reveal that it shows up in trace amounts in some foods Canadians eat, like Cheerios and Kraft Dinner. Industry has argued this represents an extremely low amount of exposure and below safety requirements.

But several advocacy groups, including the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment, Équiterre, Environmental Defence and Prevent Cancer Now had [objected to Canada's approval](#) in 2017.

They have said the department's evaluation was "deeply flawed," and provided scientific evidence suggesting the department had failed to consider or dismissed certain pieces of evidence.

Soon after the decision was released Friday, Ecojustice director of healthy communities Elaine Macdonald said in a statement that Canada's federal pesticides regulator was putting Canadians at risk.

"The only way that Canadians can rest assured that they are protected from the risks of pesticides such as glyphosate is to trust that their government is making decisions based on complete, credible, independent science," she said.

"We are very disappointed the Pest Management Regulatory Agency is ignoring the potential impacts glyphosate could have on human health and the environment by relying on tainted science."

Last year, a court in California ruled that pesticide manufacturer Monsanto, now owned by Bayer, [knowingly hid the risks](#) of its glyphosate-based product Roundup, and that the pesticide had contributed to the development of cancer in Lee Johnson, a former groundskeeper who had regularly used the product.

As part of that and other legal action, internal company documents were released that lawyers for Johnson had argued showed the company was involved in manipulating scientific papers about glyphosate's health effects.

'Our scientists left no stone unturned'

Health Canada appeared to have relied on some of these [Monsanto Papers](#), as they came to be known, such as a manuscript for a 2013 review study, referred to in a footnote of Canada's re-evaluation decision, that appears to have been co-written by a Monsanto scientist.

Bayer has said the company "has not sought to influence science outcomes" and that glyphosate-based pesticides "have been used safely and successfully for over four decades." The products "are safe when used as directed," it insists.

The department said Friday that "the concerns raised by the objectors could not be scientifically supported when considering the entire body of relevant data."

"Our scientists left no stone unturned in conducting this review," Health Canada said. "They had access to all relevant data and information from federal and provincial governments, international regulatory agencies, published scientific reports and multiple pesticide manufacturers. This includes the reviews referred to in the Monsanto Papers."

Annie Bérubé, director of government relations at *Équiterre*, said she maintained that the scientific process at Health Canada appeared to have been "compromised" by "manipulated data and flawed analyses."

"Today's decision continues to entrench glyphosate-based agriculture in Canada at the expense of our health and the environment," said Bérubé. "Meanwhile, other countries like France are implementing plans to phase out glyphosate and encouraging healthier, more sustainable food production."

No arms-length review needed, department says

Équiterre had also expressed concerns that scientists within Health Canada were [reviewing](#) a decision that had been made by their colleagues.

Health Canada officials had been reviewing their own work on approving glyphosate, as part of an internal process that began before the California verdict and continued after.

Karen Ross, an expert on sustainable agriculture at *Équiterre*, told *National Observer* she believed that situation didn't make for a sufficiently independent review, and called for an arm's length panel.

Health Minister Ginette Petitpas Taylor's office had said a decision whether to create such a panel would be made "in the coming weeks." On Friday, the department said it did not strike an external panel, and instead "selected a group of 20 of its own scientists" to evaluate the objections to its decision.

Officials said Friday they believed this group was sufficiently independent, because the scientists that had been picked were not involved in the 2017 re-evaluation decision themselves.

Smaller period for approval not considered

The department did not consider the possibility of re-approving glyphosate for a shorter time period than the 15-year span that Canada had approved it for, officials also revealed Friday.

The European Commission [opted to do just that](#), when it re-approved the ingredient in 2017. Responding to public concerns, the commission approved glyphosate for a five-year period instead of 15 years, describing it as "no routine case."

National Observer [reported in November](#) that Canada had been notified of 68 "serious incidents" from April to October 2016 involving glyphosate, where complainants alleged they had developed cancer due to exposure.

The department said it couldn't follow up on these cases because it didn't have enough information, and couldn't obtain more details because it didn't possess the specifics of the people involved.

Health Canada said it continues to monitor for new information related to glyphosate, "including regulatory actions from other governments," and is ready to take "appropriate action" if key risks are identified.