

# Monsanto Drags IARC Into the Depths of Its Disinformation Campaign on Glyphosate

*Genna Reed*

Industry lobbyists have learned that a tried and true way to delay or block unwanted policy proposals is to attack the science supporting those policies and the integrity of the institutions that have conducted the science. We've seen this time and time again as plays in the [disinformation playbook](#).

6        SEC. 229. None of the funds made available by this  
7 Act may be used to support the Monograph Programme  
8 of the International Agency for Research on Cancer (re-  
9 ferred to in this title as "IARC") unless, within 90 days  
10 of enactment of this Act, the NIH provides to the Com-  
11 mittee on Appropriations and the Committee on Science,  
12 Space, and Technology of the House of Representatives  
13 a report describing that grants, contracts, or cooperative  
14 agreement awards to IARC will require: 1) a transparent  
15 review process for Monograph Programme assessments in  
16 which drafts and revisions are publicly available online; 2)  
17 a process to address conflicts of interest in the selection  
18 of individuals involved with Monograph Programme as-  
19 sessments; 3) use of the best available science in devel-  
20 oping Monograph Programme assessment conclusions;  
21 and 4) summaries of relevant and significant studies and  
22 reports that do not support assessments conclusions.

Language from the House of Representatives' draft HHS fiscal year 2019 appropriations bill.

One of these examples is continuing to play out right now. Monsanto and the American Chemistry Council have launched a full-throttle attack on the international scientific body, the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), after it issued a review of the scientific literature in 2015 that concluded that the herbicide, glyphosate, is a probable carcinogen. The latest development in this years-long effort? A rider on the House version of the [HHS appropriations bill](#) that would prevent the National Institutes of Health from lending any financial support to IARC unless it agrees to push for reforms at IARC that have been called for by Lamar Smith and the House Science Committee at the bequest of the chemical industry.

## So why all the fuss about IARC and its glyphosate review?

IARC is an arm of the World Health Organization and funded by 24 governments, and predominantly by the NIH National Cancer Institute. It has been reviewing the evidence on potentially carcinogenic agents for over four decades and has been continually improving its process to maintain rigor, objectivity, and transparency.

Enter glyphosate. Glyphosate is the active ingredient in Monsanto's best-selling weedkiller, Roundup, and is used on the majority of commodity crops in the United States because it is effective at controlling a variety of weed types. Any change in the safety determination of this chemical would shake up the messaging that the company has used for years. Monsanto got to work quickly using [several plays](#) in the [disinformation playbook](#) to control the science and the narrative.

## Monsanto's campaign to tarnish IARC's credibility

IARC's [monograph volume 112](#) evaluated glyphosate and four other herbicides by reviewing the published, peer-reviewed scientific literature available and classifying it as a "probable carcinogen." It was published in March 2015. A complex campaign to challenge the IARC study and IARC itself had also begun from Monsanto even before the monograph came out since they were [tipped off by a former EPA employee](#) on the document's conclusions months beforehand. [Documents released in 2017](#) revealed that as a part of their plan, they would attempt to get a former IARC member to publish a paper on IARC that would discuss "how it was formed, how it works, hasn't evolved over time, they are archaic and not needed now." They would try to form "crop protection advisory groups," conduct scientific papers on animal carcinogenicity for which "majority of writing can be done by Monsanto" to keep costs down. Monsanto even [ghostwrote](#) at least one opinion piece about IARC that was published in Forbes.

In early 2017, the American Chemistry Council (of which Monsanto is a member) started an organization called the Campaign for Accuracy in Public Health Research aimed at setting the record straight on cancer determinations for certain items, including glyphosate, red meat, and cell phones by promoting "credible, unbiased, and transparent science as the basis for public policy decisions." On its website, there are several [pieces](#) that attack IARC's process. This appeared to be almost directly a response to the IARC's 2015 classification as glyphosate as a probable carcinogen.

Not only was an assault launched on the institution, but the scientists at the helm of IARC and those who composed the glyphosate workgroup have been harassed and their integrity challenged. The conservative advocacy group and [known FOIA abusers](#), Energy and Environment Legal Institute (E and E Legal) [filed a series of open record requests](#) to IARC panelists asking for deliberative documents about the glyphosate monograph, to which IARC has told scientists not to release the documents because IARC is the owner of those materials, seeking to defend panelists' right to debate evidence openly and critically which does not need to be subject to public scrutiny.

The House of Representatives Science Committee, led by the fossil fuel and chemical industry's favorite champion Lamar Smith, has sent [multiple letters](#) to IARC Director, Christopher Wild, questioning the integrity of glyphosate workgroup to which he has responded (in [November 2017](#) and [January 2018](#)) and defended both the participating scientists and the institution and its process as upholding the

“highest principles of transparency, independence, and scientific integrity.”

This whole campaign is eerily similar to the [Sugar Association's effort to derail a World Health Organization \(WHO\) report](#) that recommended a 10 percent limit on calorie intake from added sugars back in 2003. The report, produced by the WHO and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in consultation with 30 health experts, reviewed the scientific literature and concluded that added sugars “threaten the nutritional quality of diets” and that limiting sugar intake would be “likely to contribute to reducing the risk of unhealthy weight gain.” In a letter to the WHO, the president and chief executive officer (CEO) of the Sugar Association demanded that the report be removed from WHO websites, arguing that “taxpayer dollars should not be used to support misguided, non-science-based reports.” The letter also threatened the suspension of U.S. funding to the WHO, warning, “We will exercise every avenue available to expose the dubious nature of [the report] including asking Congressional appropriators to challenge future funding” to the WHO. In addition to attacking the WHO directly, the Sugar Association, along with six other industry trade associations wrote a letter to the secretary of HHS Tommy Thompson asking for his “personal intervention” in removing the WHO/FAO report from the WHO website and challenging the report’s recommended sugar intake limit. Unfortunately, this effort was effective in limiting the report’s influence on health policy. The World Health Assembly—the WHO’s decisionmaking body and the world’s highest health-policy-setting entity—issued a global health strategy on diet and health the following year, and the strategy contained no reference to the comprehensive WHO/FAO report.

## **IARC must be protected**

We need more independent bodies conducting scientific reviews of the chemicals that we are exposed to on a daily basis, not fewer. And we certainly need to hang on to the institutions that currently provide us with this much-needed service. Over one hundred scientists and health professionals from US and international institutions published [a paper](#) in 2015 evaluating IARC’s role over the course of the past 40 years, outlining its role in identifying carcinogenic substances and informing important public health policy decisions. They push back against recent criticisms, writing, “We are concerned...that the criticisms expressed by a vocal minority regarding the evaluations of a few agents may promote the denigration of a process that has served the public and public health well for many decades for reasons that are not supported by data.” They further write, “disagreement with the conclusions in an IARC Monograph for an individual agent is not evidence for a failed or biased approach.” Indeed, Monsanto doesn’t have grounds to question the integrity of an entire institution just because its findings are inconvenient.

This most recent attempt to use the appropriations process to cut funding to this scientific body is a glaring example of the way in which the disinformation playbook is employed in sometimes more subtle ways that can have dramatic impacts. Funding of our agencies should not be bogged down by ideological and political riders that can have dramatic impacts on science-based policymaking and the future of international science institutions. The language requiring NIH to restrict IARC funding if certain terms aren’t met should be stripped from the HHS funding bill and IARC should continue to receive US funding to help support all of its important work reviewing the cancer risk of environmental contaminants to inform safety thresholds across the globe.

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**NOTE:** *This post has been edited to remove the name of the former IARC staffer that Monsanto suggested they would contact about publishing a paper on IARC, since he did not write such a paper.*

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