

U.S. releases clear stance on glyphosate

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Len Ritter has been a toxicologist for more than four decades and during his career he's read thousands of reports on pesticides.

But when the United States Environmental Protection Agency recently said that "glyphosate is not a carcinogen", Ritter was stunned by the tone and language in the report.

"Regulatory agencies are never that clear... they like to leave themselves a little wiggle room," said Ritter, a professor emeritus in the School of Environmental Sciences at the University of Guelph.

"This is probably the only time, in 42 years, that I've seen the EPA has clearly, unequivocally (taken such a stand). The EPA just doesn't talk like that. I was shocked when I saw this."

On April 30 the EPA released its review of the safety of glyphosate, the active ingredient in Roundup herbicide. In a news release the agency was crystal clear about its findings.

"EPA continues to find that there are no risks to public health when glyphosate is used in accordance with its current label... The agency's scientific findings on human health risk are consistent with the conclusions of science reviews by many other countries."

Ritter was surprised by the EPA's stance on glyphosate, but also pleased because most toxicologists hold the same position.

"The preponderance of the world opinion, the scientific opinion... on glyphosate and cancer, is it is not a carcinogen," said Ritter, a fellow of the Academy of Toxicological Sciences and former chief of the pesticides division at Health Canada.

Ritter is known for his work on pesticides and food additives.

In 2006, the World Health Organization awarded him a medal for his contributions to toxicology.

Some toxicologists might use different language than the EPA. They would say glyphosate is not a

carcinogen when humans are exposed to realistic, real world concentrations. The EPA didn't add that qualifier.

"If you read their language, it's very clear. They don't put that caveat on it," Ritter said. "I think (experts) have stopped saying that.... They're saying now it just isn't a carcinogen. It has nothing to do with the exposure levels."

The EPA may believe glyphosate is safe but Merchant Law Group, a Canadian firm led by Tony Merchant, has filed papers in Saskatchewan for a class action suit against Bayer and Monsanto. It claims glyphosate contributed to cancer of farmers and other Canadians who used the herbicide.

The lead plaintiff in the case is Garry Gadd, a farmer from Moose Jaw, Sask. He was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma five years ago.

The proposed class action is just one of thousands of similar lawsuits, where people across the U.S. are suing Bayer and Monsanto over the safety of glyphosate.

Many of the lawsuits are related to non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, but the scientific evidence is also clear on this issue, Ritter said.

Since 1993, the U.S. National Cancer Institute has conducted the Agricultural Health Study (AHS), which has looked at cancer and other health issues in 89,000 farmers and their spouses in Iowa and North Carolina.

"It's the largest, most comprehensive investigation of health outcomes, in farm populations in the U.S., ever undertaken," Ritter said.

In 2018, AHS scientists published research on glyphosate use and the cancer incidence of participants in the study. The scientists concluded:

- no observed associations between glyphosate use and overall cancer risk
- no observed associations between glyphosate use and NHL (Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma) overall or any of its subtypes
- the lack of association between glyphosate and NHL is also consistent with the previous AHS analysis

The AHS findings on NHL are important because epidemiologists, especially those who study pesticides and cancer, watch for non-Hodgkin's lymphoma because it is the canary in the coal mine.

If there is higher occurrence of NHL, it's a sign that a pesticide is a problem.

"If you get a hit on NHL, if that's increased, then you've probably got a real carcinogen," Ritter said.

Health Canada's position on glyphosate is similar to the EPA, but it uses different language.

In its 2017 re-evaluation of the herbicide, Health Canada said "glyphosate is not genotoxic and unlikely to pose a human cancer risk."

Genotoxic is when a chemical damages DNA, thereby causing mutations or cancer.

