

# General Mills uses contracts to avoid glyphosate | The Western Producer

*By Robert Arnason*

Company hasn't taken hard line on pre-harvest herbicide use but is experimenting with ways to avoid the practice

General Mills, like all companies, needs happy and satisfied customers.

That's why it's asking suppliers, farmers who produce oats, wheat, sugar, soybeans and other commodities, to reduce pesticide use.

"We can see the trends. Consumers want less pesticide in their food," said John Wiebold, General Mills vice president, North American direct material sourcing. "They want less things in their food that shouldn't be there."

The company isn't instructing farmers to use fewer pesticides. Instead, it intends to reduce pesticide use in its supply chain by encouraging farmers to adopt practices like regenerative agriculture, integrated pest management and increasing organic acres.

General Mills is hoping to cut pesticide use in its supply chain for a number of reasons but the number one reason is its customers.

"I think what's happening now is science and capabilities are increasing. The ability to detect pesticides, at lower and lower levels in our foods, is there," Wiebold said from the General Mills headquarters in Minneapolis

"And consumers are responding to that. And we're responding to what they're (asking). Because they're ultimately the reason we get to do business, every day."

Consumers have asked General Mills a variety of questions about pesticides, he said.

"We hear: is my food safe? Is there residue in it? We hear pesticides are bad for the environment and they're killing all the bees.... We hear: I'm concerned about feeding my kids," Wiebold said.

"We know consumers care about it. We do."

General Mills buys most of its oats from grain companies in Western Canada, which means its pesticide reduction plan may affect oat growers in Manitoba and Saskatchewan.

Many growers apply pre-harvest glyphosate to oats, a practice that is becoming more controversial because the herbicide can translocate into the oat kernels. Glyphosate is the active ingredient in Roundup and many other popular herbicide brands.

The Environmental Working Group, a U.S. organization, has reported on glyphosate residues in oatmeal, breakfast cereals and snack bars.

The amounts are typically in the parts per billion, well within safety margins, but the amount of residue doesn't seem to matter.

"Breakfast cereals still contaminated by weed killer, environmental group says," read a CNN headline in June.

Despite the negative press, General Mills is not taking a hard line on pre-harvest glyphosate for oats.

"We know it's a commercially viable and commercially accepted practice right now.... So we're taking oats, today, that have some glyphosate residue on them," Wiebold said.

"I would say, today, we haven't taken any decisions around the pre-harvest use of glyphosate on the crop. But we certainly know there is an environment out there that can be negative against glyphosate. If legislation changes, if rules change, if consumers are overwhelmingly moving in a certain direction, we're going to need to move with those changes."

The company isn't telling oat growers to stop, but it is contracting a few farmers to produce oats without pre-harvest glyphosate.

"We are experimenting with contract grown oats in some of those areas (in Canada)," Wiebold said. "In some cases, the same farmers are being approached to work on regen ag and to supply General Mills with oats grown on contract through our suppliers. When we've experimented with contracts, we've asked the farmers not to apply glyphosate because we want to understand our ability to source oats without that pesticide applied to oats."

While it hasn't made a decision on pre-harvest glyphosate, General Mills is committed to regenerative agriculture.

The company is working with more than 40 producers in Western Canada, coaching them on use of cover crops, livestock integration, diverse crop rotations and soil health.

Wiebold is convinced that regenerative ag will benefit General Mills and the farmers who follow the practices.

The company will benefit because its supply of ingredients will be cleaner and more reliable. Producers will have more resilient soils and should be more profitable.

"Our push to get to a million acres of regeneratively farmed ... is going to help us shift the curve on what our pesticides, really look like, from a residue standpoint. In our crops and in the raw materials that are coming in," Wiebold said.

"They (producers) start to see step changes in the amount of inputs they need to lay into their land.... So they spend less on cost and see an improvement in the bottom line."