

The heat increases on glyphosate

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MARK BUCKINGHAM



With the GB regulatory renewal process underway for glyphosate, it appears the battle between for and against is intensifying. *CPM* reviews what’s currently known about its proposed renewal, and why the active substance continues to attract controversy.

By Janine Adamson

The regulatory approval process for plant protection products is a complicated and often drawn-out affair; and rightly so. After all, the purpose is to ensure active substances and their subsequent formulated products pose no detrimental effect to either human health or the environment. Without an authorisation for use, a product can’t be used, sold, supplied or stored.

In Great Britain, approvals are undertaken by the Chemicals Regulation Division (CRD) – a subsidiary of the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). And now, never has its work been so widely anticipated – as it undertakes a complete review of glyphosate in readiness for the chemical’s proposed renewal.

While active substance and

plant protection product renewals occur relatively regularly, it appears glyphosate’s outcome is attracting more attention than usual. Bayer’s head of public affairs for UK and Ireland, Mark Buckingham, says there are multiple reasons behind this.

AN ACTIVE OF SUBSTANCE

“Globally, glyphosate is *the* primary plant protection product. Equally, it was the first herbicide to be used with the wave of genetically-modified crops in the 1990s; and it’s been the subject of hugely expensive litigation cases in the US,” he explains.

“Importantly, this is the first active substance renewal to be undertaken by CRD since Brexit was announced – others have been just extensions.”

It seems if any one plant protection

product was to divide opinion, it would indeed be glyphosate. In fact, campaigners have recently joined the Soil Association to call for the government to ban glyphosate as a pre-harvest desiccant, in a bid to eradicate residues in food products.

At the core of this particular campaign is what’s been happening



Scientific evidence

Glyphosate is the most extensively studied plant protection product and associated reviews are very thorough and robustly replicated, stresses Bayer’s Mark Buckingham.



Significant impact

According to Premium Crops' Nigel Padbury, losing glyphosate as a pre-harvest desiccant would prove a huge barrier to the adoption of minor crops.

▶ on the Continent – glyphosate as a desiccant was banned in the EU in 2023. In terms of relevance, this is particularly significant given the government is amid talks to strike a deal with the EU on the Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) agreement – a set of rules for the trade of plants, animals, food, and agricultural products.

So looking at mere facts alone, what's actually happening with

glyphosate in Great Britain? Firstly, the approval for glyphosate as an active substance was due to expire on 15 December 2025, having already been extended for three years post-Brexit.

Then, CRD announced the authorisation would again be extended until 15 December 2026, to allow a complete review of the science as well as to give sufficient time for public consultation. According to the CRD's website, it's currently assessing 'whether glyphosate continues to meet the legislative approval criteria for an active substance'.

FEEDBACK WELCOMED

Although the 60-day public consultation period is yet to be announced – understood to take place in summer 2026 – comments received from this will be considered. A report will then be written by CRD which will be submitted to Defra for a final decision.

If glyphosate meets the legislative approval criteria, it can be renewed for a period of up to 15 years. If not, a more restricted approval may be considered, or worst case scenario, it'll be banned altogether and products containing the active ingredient will be phased out.

From Bayer's perspective, the team

is confident in the science, raises Mark. "Glyphosate has been used in the UK for 52 years – it's the most extensively studied plant protection product and the associated reviews are very thorough and robustly replicated. As such, regulators can be confident in its safety."

He adds that the safety profile of glyphosate supports its use in all situations, including pre-harvest desiccation. "There's nothing to suggest a risk. We understand the EU decision to change glyphosate's label in this respect was driven mostly by politics, not evidence.

"This will ultimately be a political decision for us too, but it's also a routine review. Other than the caveat on pre-harvest desiccation, the EU renewal went relatively well and offered an additional 10 years of use," explains Mark.

Premium Crops' Nigel Padbury is chairman of the BSPB's Minor Crops Group. He suspects there could be potential compromise regarding pre-harvest desiccation for GB, purely down to the government facilitating the SPS negotiations. "This would pose a significant issue – we grow minor crops in the UK that absolutely require a desiccant option," stresses Nigel. ▶



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A worrying future

If glyphosate was lost altogether in the UK, margins would come under further strain and many crops would be unviable, suggests grower David Bell.

► “Convincing a grower to produce a minor crop such as chickpeas or sunflowers without glyphosate will be far more difficult in the first place. There may be years where the crop doesn’t warrant it, but we know during wet seasons that desiccants are critical. Therefore, losing glyphosate will prove a huge barrier to the adoption of minor crops,” he states.

Nigel acknowledges that if this does become reality, there could be other options such as the resurgence of swathers. These were once a mainstay on arable farms, but crop varieties have moved on considerably as has chemistry, he adds.

“We have to remember that glyphosate isn’t being directly sprayed to food; cereals and oilseeds are ingredients that require processing. Growers have been spraying glyphosate for years with minimal issues. If there was such a serious problem with residues and food contamination,

surely science would have alerted us to it by now?” he queries.

INDUSTRY CONFIDENCE

As the emotive headlines keep appearing across media outlets, Mark urges growers to continue with business as usual. “We all have to pay attention to the science – there are 50+ years’ experience with glyphosate. Equally, we’re confident regarding the product’s stewardship too; we know when conditions are risky or when there’s a danger of sub-optimal control.”

To that end, in the wake of glyphosate-resistant Italian ryegrass, Mark hopes stewardship guidance will be stringently adhered to. Equally, that other herbicide active ingredients are successful when it’s their time for authorisation renewal. “We mustn’t erode alternative herbicides either, as this will leave glyphosate vulnerable. We require all actives in the toolbox to continue to achieve high levels of weed control.”

His advice to growers is to be proactive when the public consultation finally opens. “If possible, step up and send in a few lines of support. With sector alignment, we could offer a really compelling argument.”

Nigel agrees: “Those who can, should have their views known – it’s critical that a diversity of voices are provided for this. Equally, the NFU is collating evidence, so growers could approach their local rep and contribute that way instead.”

David Bell is a mixed farmer in East Fife and chair of the Voluntary Initiative (VI). He recently spoke at a glyphosate renewal reception in parliament, and is firm in his position on the active ingredient.

“Glyphosate isn’t a silver bullet and it’s certainly not used casually. We also shouldn’t neglect that such products are applied by trained professionals operating within one of the most tightly regulated systems in the world.

“Across UK agriculture, most sprayer operators – more than 22,000 – are members of the National Register of Sprayer Operators (NRoSO), which requires continual professional development and ongoing training in best practice, stewardship, application technology, environmental protection and safe use. That professionalism on-farm is a really important part of this conversation,” he stresses.

David is also concerned that directly comparing the UK with the EU is dangerous, given significant climatic differences. “As you move into northern England and Scotland, conditions become even more challenging. We have shorter growing seasons, lower accumulated sunshine hours, and far more variable harvest conditions.

► “Some cereal crops may even have

SFI26 provisional dates revealed

Further information released regarding first wave of applications

Defra has published ‘near-final’ versions of its SFI26 guidance, terms and conditions and actions, with official confirmation due mid-June.

Currently, it expects the first application window to open from 30 June for two groups – small farms, and those without an existing Environmental Land Management revenue agreement.

Prior to this, Defra will invite a small number of eligible farmers to apply

from around 18 June, to test and refine the application service in a controlled manner ahead of its full rollout.

It adds that farmers interested in applying should check eligibility, read the guidance carefully, and take steps to be ready for when the application window opens.

Commenting on the update, CLA deputy president, Joe Evans, says the details are welcomed. “It’s now vital

that the scheme is fully deliverable for both the first application window in June and the second in September.

“For more than a year, industry has been living through a period of uncertainty. All farmers, and particularly those who are in schemes finishing in December, must be able to seamlessly transition into SFI so they can continue delivering for the environment and investing in resilient food production.”

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David Hurn

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“We’re using a wide range of cultural tools alongside chemistry to keep a lid on the grassweeds as best as we can.”

David is using stale seedbeds and delayed drilling, aiming to get, and spray-off, two flushes before drilling autumn crops. Hand-roguing tidies up any surviving black-grass in early summer.

“Luximo® does a great job,” he adds.

He applied Luximo® across the board in harvest years 2024 and 2025, with the exception of one field.

“With hindsight, it all should have had Luximo®”

Black-grass populations on David’s farm are currently stable, but he says it is important to stay on top with a reliable autumn strategy.

Reflecting on David’s Luximoment, BASF’s grassweed expert Stuart Kevis adds:

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► a ‘birthday’, which can baffle other growers. Crops can remain green and uneven far later into the season, while wet weather can close harvest windows very quickly. Therefore, pre-harvest glyphosate use in Scotland is less about ‘speeding up’ crops and more about managing risk, ensuring harvestability, reducing drying requirements, and protecting grain quality where weather pressure is high,” he explains.

INCREASED COSTS

From a practical perspective, if glyphosate was completely removed tomorrow, the immediate impact on many businesses would be significant, highlights David. “Most independent analysis suggests we’d see increased cultivation costs, greater fuel use, more pressure on labour and machinery, and in many situations, lower yields due to poorer weed control and delayed establishment.

“Margins, which are already tight in UK agriculture, would come under further strain and many crops would be unviable. Then for some growers, particularly those operating reduced tillage systems, it could force a return to more intensive cultivations, undoing years of progress in soil management and carbon reduction.

“Ultimately, farmers want the same thing as everyone else – productive, resilient and environmentally-responsible food production. That requires access to a range of safe, regulated and science-based tools, used responsibly and professionally. Glyphosate is one of those, and for many farms across

the UK, particularly in more challenging northern climates, it remains an important part of sustainable crop production.”

On the flip side, the Soil Association is pressing on with its desiccation campaign in earnest. “No one wants a chemical linked to cancer in their sandwiches or breakfast cereal,” argues Cathy Cliff, on the Soil Association’s website. “The UK is already lagging behind Europe which takes a much tougher stance on pesticides that pose a risk to human health.

“The government must act to protect public health by stopping this toxic chemical from being sprayed on our food at harvest. It must do the right thing and remove glyphosate from our foods, while supporting farmers to find alternatives that protect nature and public health.”

The campaign highlights various points regarding glyphosate as a probable carcinogen, that it can cause cancer, and that pre-harvest desiccation is the primary cause of glyphosate residues in foods.

“Experts are increasingly warning that there is no ‘safe dose’ of glyphosate, meaning the chemical should be removed from our food. Evidence of the harms linked to glyphosate has rocketed over the past decade, and we’re calling on the government to respond. It’s time to cut the chemicals from our food and fields,” states Cathy.

Despite this negative press, Mark remains hopeful. “Glyphosate’s safety profile suggests it should continue to be available. Let’s be confident,” he concludes. ●

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