



BRIEFING PAPER

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Glyphosate: controversy around the EU's re-approval of the pesticide

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Summary

This briefing from the House of Commons Library looks at the recent history of the EU authorisation for the herbicide glyphosate.

Glyphosate has been in the news in recent months because of a delay to a decision at EU level to re-approve its use. The issue is contentious as [some studies have claimed in the past](#) that the pesticide could carry health risks.

Key points are:

- Glyphosate is a widely-used, non-selective herbicide (or herbicide ingredient) registered for use on many food and non-food crops, as well as non-crop areas where total vegetation control is desired. It was discovered and brought to market as a herbicide by Monsanto in the 1970s under the trade name "Roundup".
- Roundup is the world's best-selling weedkiller. Farmers and growers apply it to control weeds without harming their crops. It is also used as a crop desiccant.
- In its [briefing on glyphosate](#), the National Farmers Union (NFU) describes it as a "vital resource in modern agriculture" and highlights (for example) its role in reducing soil erosion and compaction.
- Pesticides are regulated initially at an EU level. EU approval of the herbicide glyphosate was granted in January 2002, based on a review of health and environmental data.
- A European Commission proposal to renew the authorisation for glyphosate for the next 15 years was expected in 2012, but was delayed so that the decision could be informed by two key scientific opinions on glyphosate's safety from two bodies - the UN's specialist cancer agency, the International Association of Cancer Registries (IARC) and the European Food Safety Agency (EFSA).
- The renewal of the EU authorisation for glyphosate was delayed at EU level with conflicting scientific assessments:
 - [The IARC concluded](#) that glyphosate was "**probably carcinogenic**" to humans. It also found that there was "limited evidence of carcinogenicity in humans for non-Hodgkin lymphoma" but "convincing evidence that glyphosate also can cause cancer in laboratory animals".
 - [The EFSA concluded](#) (taking into account the IARC findings) that glyphosate **was unlikely to be genotoxic** i.e. damaging to DNA or **to pose a carcinogenic threat to humans**.
- The European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) in March 2017 [concluded that glyphosate was not carcinogenic](#), although it had found that it caused serious eye damage and was toxic to aquatic life. This review will contribute to future authorisations.

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- Future approval of glyphosate remains contentious on some Member States, although the UK supports the continued use of it.
- [A report from Oxford Economics and the Anderson Centre](#) (in partnership with the Crop Protection Association) in June 2017 concluded that an EU ban on pesticides containing glyphosate could:
 - lead to a reduction in farm output of £940 million
 - reduce tax revenues generated by agriculture and its supply chain by £193 million
 - see wheat production fall by 20 per cent, cereal fall by 15 per cent and oil seed rape fall by 37 per cent and consequently push up food prices.
- The NFU is encouraging its members to write to MPs and MEPs.

This briefing therefore examines:

- What glyphosate is and how it is used
- The views of stakeholders – manufacturers, farmers and NGOs – and recent campaigns
- The EU's current approval for glyphosate
- Concerns about pesticide residues in food and
- The impact Brexit might have.

The European Parliament Research Service blog post [Renewal of the authorisation of the use of the herbicide substance glyphosate](#) sets out the history of EU action on glyphosate up to January 2017.

The Commons Library briefing [Brexit: impact across policy areas](#) provides more background information on pesticide regulation and the possible implications of Brexit (CBP 07213, 26 August 2016: see page 63).

More Commons Library briefings on agriculture and environmental issues are available on the topic pages for [agriculture](#) and [environmental protection](#).

1. What is glyphosate?

Glyphosate is a widely-used, non-selective herbicide (or herbicide ingredient) registered for use on many food and non-food crops, as well as non-crop areas where total vegetation control is desired. It was discovered and brought to market as a herbicide by Monsanto in the 1970s under the trade name "Roundup".

Roundup is the world's best-selling weedkiller and is used widely in combination with GM herbicide-tolerant crops, which can absorb high levels of Roundup without being killed.

Glyphosate has been in the news in recent months because of a delay to a decision at EU level to re-approve its use.

1.1 How and why is glyphosate used?

Farmers and growers apply Roundup to control weeds without harming their crops. It is also used as a crop desiccant.

In its [briefing on glyphosate](#), the National Farmers Union (NFU) makes the case for its use, describing it as a "vital resource in modern agriculture" and highlighting (for example) its role in reducing soil erosion and compaction:

The loss of glyphosate has the potential to drive many producers from best practice of soil management, perhaps encouraging a return to annual ploughing or an increased number of shallower passes. Furthermore it would necessitate the increase use of non-selective herbicides, which would lead to poorer weed control.¹

There is no evidence, the NFU says, of resistance to glyphosate.² The Agricultural and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB) has, though, published guidance to farmers and growers on [minimising the risk of glyphosate resistance](#). It points to the potential for more glyphosate resistance:

Current changes in usage patterns in the UK are potentially increasing the risk of glyphosate resistance development.

An over-reliance on a limited group of herbicide modes of action has accelerated the development of herbicide-resistant grass weeds, particularly black-grass. This has been mainly due to a lack of new herbicides, regulatory policy changes, a limited crop rotation and the under-exploitation of cultural control practices.³

¹ NFU online, [Glyphosate – the importance in UK agriculture](#), March 2016

² As above

³ AHDB, [AHDB Information Sheet 03. Minimising the risk of glyphosate resistance](#), Summer 2015. Further guidance on pesticides and resistance has been published by the ADHB in [Managing weeds in managing weeds in arable rotations – a guide](#) (updated Spring 2014).

2. EU approval for glyphosate

In a nutshell:

- EU approval of the herbicide glyphosate was granted in January 2002, based on a review of health and environmental data.
- The issue is contentious as [some studies have claimed in the past](#) that the pesticide could carry health risks.⁴
- A European Commission proposal to renew the authorisation for glyphosate for the next 15 years was expected in 2012, but was delayed so that the decision could be informed by two key scientific opinions on glyphosate's safety from two bodies - the UN's specialist cancer agency, the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) and the European Food Safety Agency (EFSA).
- The IARC and EFSA reached very different conclusions.
- [The IARC concluded](#) that glyphosate was 'probably carcinogenic' to humans. It also found that there was "limited evidence of carcinogenicity in humans for non-Hodgkin lymphoma" but "convincing evidence that glyphosate also can cause cancer in laboratory animals".^{5,6}
- [The EFSA concluded](#), taking into account the IARC findings, that glyphosate was unlikely to be genotoxic i.e. damaging to DNA or to pose a carcinogenic threat to humans.⁷
- The renewal of the EU authorisation for glyphosate was therefore delayed at EU level.
- The European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) in March 2017 [concluded that glyphosate was not carcinogenic](#), although it found that it caused serious eye damage and was toxic to aquatic life.⁸ This review will inform future authorisations.

2.1 The EU approval regime for pesticides

Background reading

- The Commons Library briefing [Brexit: impact across policy areas](#) provides more background information.⁹
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[Regulation EC No 1107/2009](#) harmonises the registration of plant protection products across Member States. Safety assessments are undertaken to make sure that any pesticide residues remaining in food are not harmful to people and residues are controlled through a system of statutory Maximum Residue Levels (MRLs). MRLs are set to reflect

⁴ Arthur Neslen, "[Glyphosate unlikely to pose risk to humans. UN/WHO study says](#)", *Guardian* online, 16 May 2016

⁵ See IARC, [Q&A on Glyphosate](#), 1 March 2016

⁶ The campaign group Sense About Science has published a briefing [Glyphosate: What's the lowdown?](#) which (amongst other things) examines some of the criticism of the IARC glyphosate assessment.

⁷ See EFSA, [EFSA explains risk assessment: glyphosate](#), 2015

⁸ ECHA, [Press release ECHA/PR/17/06: Glyphosate not classified as a carcinogen by ECHA](#), 15 March 2017

⁹ CBP 07213, 26 August 2016: see page 63

the highest amount of pesticide residue expected in food when pesticides are applied correctly (in accordance with approved conditions of use).

Commission Regulation (EU) No 1141/2010 as amended by Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) No 380/2013, lays down the procedure for the renewal of the approval of a group of active substances, including glyphosate.

The Standing Committee on Plants, Animals, Food and Feed (PAFF Committee, a technical committee of Member State representatives) has been considering the evidence on glyphosate. It plays a key role in ensuring that Union measures on food and feed safety, animal health & welfare as well as plant health are practical and effective. It delivers opinions on draft measures that the Commission intends to adopt.

2.2 Re-authorisation in 2016

Glyphosate's authorisation was due to be renewed by June 2016.

The European Parliament Research Service blog post [Renewal of the authorisation of the use of the herbicide substance glyphosate](#) sets out the history of EU action on glyphosate up to January 2017.¹⁰

In simple terms, the European Parliament was not content with the Commission's draft implementing regulation and called on the Commission to submit a new one. So on 13 April last year, the European parliament adopted a resolution calling for the European Commission to renew the marketing approval for glyphosate for seven years instead of 15 years and for professional uses only. The vote was non-binding on the Commission and EU governments, but as an elected body it can force a discussion of the issues raised.¹¹

It was expected that the [PAFF Committee](#) would vote on the matter at its meeting on 18/19 May last year but, although the Committee discussed the matter, it did not vote.

As the European Parliament Research Service blog explains:

The Standing Committee on Plants, Animals, Food and Feed (**Phytopharmaceuticals Section**), composed by national experts of all Member States and presided by a European Commission representative, should have voted subsequently to adopt or reject the Commission proposal by qualified majority.

However, as no such majority was reached, it was up to the Commission to decide on a limited extension of the approval of glyphosate. At the same time, the Commission presented to the Member States three recommendations for adoption as soon as possible.¹²

¹⁰ 26 January 2017

¹¹ "Parliament votes for 7 year glyphosate authorisation for 'professional uses' only", Agra Europe, 13 April 2016 and "[EU Parliament votes to ban most uses of glyphosate](#)", *The Ecologist*, 13 April 2016

¹² European Parliament Research Service, [Renewal of the authorisation of the use of the herbicide substance glyphosate](#), 26 January 2017

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[A Q&A briefing on the European Commission website](#) also provides a timeline and records the situation in June 2016.¹³

A [European Citizens' Initiative](#) was registered in January 2017, starting a process of gathering signatures which might (if the threshold number of signatures is reached) require the Commission to act.¹⁴ At the time of writing, signatures are still being collected.¹⁵

The Glyphosate Task Force (GTF), made up of pesticide manufacturers, [expressed disappointment](#) at the time:

At this stage, failure to vote on the Commission's proposal on the re-authorisation of glyphosate by Member States represents an unprecedented delay compared to the standard timeframe and applicable EU framework for the re-approval of pesticide active substances.¹⁶

Glyphosate was finally re-authorised on 29 June 2016, just a few days before its authorisation expired, for a reduced period of 18 months instead of the expected 15 years. This decision was [welcomed](#) by the NFU.¹⁷

It was [reported in May 2017](#) that the European commission considered a 10 year extension to glyphosate's authorisation to be a "starting point" for discussion, with the final word resting with Member States.¹⁸

UK Government view

The UK Government supported the re-approval, based on current scientific evidence.

The Government [set out its stance on pesticides](#) in general and glyphosate in particular in May last year:

The European Food Safety Authority concluded that glyphosate met these standards and UK experts agree. We therefore consider that glyphosate should be approved. If this happens, all authorised products which contain glyphosate will be individually re-assessed at a Member State level to ensure that they also meet safety standards.

The scientific assessment carried out so far does not suggest that blanket restrictions to prevent certain uses across the EU are justified. The Government therefore does not favour the inclusion of such restrictions in any future approval of glyphosate. It should be for Member States to consider whether restrictions are needed for particular glyphosate products in particular circumstances. This would form part of the normal product re-assessment process.¹⁹

The [EU Chemicals Agency](#) has been reviewing the health effects of glyphosate, hence the shorter authorisation (see section 2.3 below).

¹³ European Commission, [Fact sheet: FAQs: Glyphosate](#), 29 June 2016

¹⁴ European Commission, [Press release: Commission registers 'Ban Glyphosate' European Citizens' Initiative](#), 10 January 2017

¹⁵ European Commission, European Citizens' Initiative register: [ECI\(2017\)000002, Ban glyphosate and protect people and the environment from toxic pesticides](#), deadline 25 January 2018

¹⁶ ["GTF expresses disappointment on failure of Member States to vote on EU re-approval of glyphosate"](#), *Glyphosate Facts*, 19 May 2016. The Glyphosate Task Force website [Glyphosate facts](#) offers more industry briefings.

¹⁷ NFU, [Glyphosate re-authorised - NFU statement](#), 29 June 2016

¹⁸ ["Commission says 10-year glyphosate extension is a 'starting point' for debate"](#), Euractiv.com, 17 May 2017

¹⁹ [HL 8171, 11 May 2016](#)

The Government [reiterated its stance](#) on glyphosate in June 2016.²⁰ In the House of Lords, also in June 2016, junior DEFRA minister Lord Gardiner of Kimble [commented on the industry studies](#) on which the EFSA had based its decision:

The mouse carcinogenicity studies were performed by independent testing laboratories and comply with the applicable OECD test guideline and Good Laboratory Practice. Carcinogenicity studies in mice are among the many EU data requirements for pesticides, and help to establish whether or not an active substance in a pesticide has carcinogenic potential.²¹

A [PQ in the House of Lords](#) in January 2017 asked whether a recent study that linked glyphosate to liver problems in rats would prompt a change in policy. Lord Gardiner of Kimble said that glyphosate currently met all relevant safety standards.²² Similarly, in April this year, farming minister, George Eustice, said that the evidence was “fairly clear”:

EFSA has studied the matter, and it believes that glyphosate is safe. It has always been the UK’s position to follow the science and the evidence on pesticide decisions, which is why we support the reauthorisation of glyphosate. We will continue to have an evidence-based, science-based approach to these issues when we leave the EU.²³

2.3 Review by the European Chemicals Agency, March 2017

The European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) in March 2017 [concluded that glyphosate was not carcinogenic](#), mutagenic²⁴ or toxic for reproduction, although it had found that it caused serious eye damage and was toxic to aquatic life.

The ECHA’s press release sets out some of the policy implications and the next steps:

The adopted opinion will go through a normal editorial check before it is sent to the European Commission. The opinion will also be made available on ECHA’s website at the same time.

The adopted opinion on the harmonised classification for glyphosate will be taken into account when the Commission and Member States consider whether to renew the approval to use glyphosate as an active substance in pesticides, later this year.²⁵

The [NFU welcomed this announcement](#), again arguing that glyphosate offered many benefits, posed no risk to human health if used correctly and should be reauthorised for another 15 years:

Now ECHA has released its classification there can be no reason why glyphosate should not be reauthorised for a further 15 years when the European Commission makes its decision later this year. We will continue to work with our members and with other

²⁰ [PQ 39216, 3 June 2016](#)

²¹ [HL 135, 3 June 2016](#)

²² [HL4761, 18 January 2017](#)

²³ [HC Deb 20 April 2017 c772](#)

²⁴ Capable of inducing mutation or increasing its rate.

²⁵ ECHA, [Press release ECHA/PR/17/06: Glyphosate not classified as a carcinogen by ECHA](#), 15 March 2017

European farming unions to ensure the facts about glyphosate's safety and importance are heard in the run-up to that decision.²⁶

2.4 Previous authorisations and delays

A European Commission proposal to renew the authorisation for glyphosate for the next 15 years was expected in 2012, but was delayed so that the decision could be informed by two key scientific opinions on glyphosate's safety: one by the UN's specialist cancer agency the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) and the other by the European Food Safety Agency (EFSA).

Conflicting views from the IARC and EFSA

The [IARC concluded](#) that glyphosate was "**probably carcinogenic**" to humans. It also found that there was "limited evidence of carcinogenicity in humans for non-Hodgkin lymphoma" but "convincing evidence that glyphosate also can cause cancer in laboratory animals".^{27,28}

The IARC and EFSA provided conflicting assessments.

The EFSA, taking into account the IARC findings, concluded that glyphosate **was unlikely to be genotoxic** i.e. damaging to DNA or **to pose a carcinogenic threat to humans**.²⁹

[The EFSA said](#) that it had come to a different conclusion to the EFSA because it took account of studies which the IARC had not included. Commenting on the differing assessments, it pointed out that the EU and IARC take different approaches to the classification of chemicals and each Member State should evaluate the plant production products sold in their territories:

[The] IARC report looked at both glyphosate – an active substance – and glyphosate-based formulations, grouping all formulations regardless of their composition. The EU assessment, on the other hand, considered only glyphosate. Member States are responsible for evaluating each plant protection product that is marketed in their territories.

This is because the EU and IARC take different approaches to the classification of chemicals. The EU scheme –assesses each individual chemical, and each marketed mixture separately. IARC assesses generic agents, including groups of related chemicals, as well as occupational or environmental exposure, and cultural or behavioural practices.³⁰

An article by Professor Bernard Stewart on The Conversation discusses what the IARC finding that glyphosate is "probably carcinogenic" means in real terms and how that risk compares to risks from (for example) tobacco smoke and asbestos:

The [IARC classifies agents that "probably" cause human cancers](#) into Group 2A. This is below Group 1 that hosts agents definitely

²⁶ NFU online, [NFU welcomes ECHA decision reinforcing glyphosate's safety](#), 15 March 2017

²⁷ See IARC, [Q&A on Glyphosate](#), 1 March 2016

²⁸ The campaign group Sense About Science has published a briefing [Glyphosate: What's the lowdown?](#) which (amongst other things) examines some of the criticism of the IARC glyphosate assessment.

²⁹ See EFSA, [EFSA explains risk assessment: glyphosate](#), 2015

³⁰ SAs above

proven to be carcinogenic to humans. They include tobacco smoke and asbestos.

For Group 1 substances, relevant studies are consistent and indicate cancer causation definitively. But then there's Group 2A with the term "probably". Here some scientific data fall short of proof. For glyphosate and many other chemicals, the relevant studies are not consistent.

The people most heavily exposed to glyphosate are those employed to spray or apply it. These were the people subject to investigations on which IARC based its determination.

[Some studies have shown workers using glyphosate](#) have more of a certain type of lymphoma (a cancer of blood-forming cells) than the average population. Other studies, including the biggest such investigation, have not.

Discrepancies are common in epidemiology, which is a study of diseases in populations. Epidemiologists use qualifiers such as "probably" or "possibly" rather than indicating that one or more studies are wrong.

But people often misunderstand what action must be taken when something has been determined as "probably carcinogenic".³¹

2.5 Is the approval regime fit for purpose?

In his state of the union address in 2016, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker argued that rules needed to change, better to deal with those situations where Member States could not reach agreement:

It is not right that when EU countries cannot decide among themselves whether or not to ban the use of glyphosate in herbicides, the Commission is forced by Parliament and Council to take a decision. So we will change those rules – because that is not democracy.³²

³¹ "[Council workers spraying the weed-killer glyphosate in playgrounds won't hurt your children](#)", *The Conversation* online, 27 September 2016. Bernard Stewart is professor of paediatrics, cancer and related disorders, epidemiology, biochemistry and cell biology at the University of New South Wales. The Conversation is a website featuring academic writers in a news style.

³² European Commission London Office, [The State of the Union 2016: Towards a Better Europe – A Europe that Protects, Empowers and Defends](#), 14 September 2016. For more about the proposed changes, see European Commission London Office, [Main news from Brussels this week](#), 17 February 2017.

3. What might happen if glyphosate were withdrawn?

In April this year, in response to a PQ about the risks to British farming if glyphosate were to be withdrawn, Lord Gardiner of Kimble said there would be “real difficulties”:

Glyphosate is important to British farming, as well as to other sectors such as transport infrastructure. In the farming context, alternative means of weed control are limited in a number of situations. Even where there are alternatives, these are likely to require other changes in practices and to carry significant costs.

There would be real difficulties if glyphosate were to be withdrawn. However, the Government does not believe that this should happen. Effective pesticides should be authorised where the scientific evidence shows they do not pose unacceptable risks to human health or the environment. In the case of glyphosate, UK and EU experts have identified no safety concerns arising from its continuing use. The EU is due to decide later this year whether or not to continue to allow the use of glyphosate.³³

With a possible EU-wide ban, Oxford Economics and the Anderson Centre (in partnership with the Crop Protection Association) [published a report](#) examining the potential impact of a glyphosate ban on the UK economy. This report concluded that an EU ban on pesticides containing glyphosate could:

- lead to a reduction in farm output of £940 million
- reduce tax revenues generated by agriculture and its supply chain by £193 million
- see wheat production fall by 20 per cent, cereal fall by 15 per cent and oil seed rape fall by 37 per cent and consequently push up food prices.³⁴

Another question that remains controversial is whether UK farming would be harmed if glyphosate were no longer available.

³³ [PQ HL6524, 12 April 2017](#)

³⁴ Oxford Economics, Anderson Centre and Crop Protection Association, [The impact of a glyphosate ban on the UK economy: Summary report](#), June 2017

4. What do stakeholders say?

4.1 The view from manufacturers

Pesticide manufacturers such as Monsanto and Syngenta have formed a [Glyphosate Task Force](#) and support the EFSA opinion. In their view, the science-based approval process has been unduly politicised at EU level.

4.2 The view from farmers

The NFU website has a [Q&A page on glyphosate](#).

The NFU argues that glyphosate is “one of the safest plant protection products in the world” and that not using glyphosate could have significant environmental impacts:

[What happens if we lose the use of glyphosate?](#)

According to research by independent agricultural consultants ADAS, the loss of glyphosate would lead to a 17 per cent fall in wheat production and a 15 per cent drop in oilseed rape production in the UK. This means the UK alone would need to find 546,000 hectares more land – an area nearly three-and-a-half times the size of London – to grow the same amount of food. The loss of glyphosate would also have a number of significant environmental impacts, including a 25% increase in greenhouse gas emissions from changes to agricultural practices. Soil quality would be damaged as more ploughing would be needed and bird habitats would be destroyed because of the need for increased mechanical weed control.³⁵

The NFU also argues that there is no substantial evidence that glyphosate is a carcinogen:

The studies from the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) which have attracted recent attention do not assess risk of glyphosate being linked with cancer, and contradicts those of its parent organisation, the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). Both of these organisations state glyphosate is ‘unlikely to present a public health concern or carcinogenic risk to humans.’

The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) assessment of glyphosate in November 2015 concluded glyphosate is unlikely to pose a carcinogenic hazard to humans ([see here for details](#)). Despite its conclusions, the EFSA report has made several recommendations; including redefining acceptable exposure limits.³⁶

³⁵ NFU online, [Glyphosate - the basics: Our Q&A](#), updated 27 January 2017

³⁶ NFU online, [Glyphosate – the importance in UK agriculture](#), March 2016

Campaigns

A [petition has been launched](#) on the 38 Degrees website, calling on farmers and others to “Stand up for UK agriculture and save Glyphosate from being banned by false knowledge and ignorance”.³⁷ At the time of writing it has 4692 signatures.

An [article in *Farmers Weekly*](#) quoted the argument from agronomist Sean Sparling (sponsor of the petition), who pointed to the risks in not permitting use of glyphosate and relying instead on other pesticides:

Stating his case for continued use of the weed-killer, Mr Sparling of SAS Agronomy argued “whole areas of the east of England will become overrun by weeds” if glyphosate was unavailable to farmers.

He criticised those campaigning for a ban and urged farmers to push back against “false knowledge and pseudoscience”.

“Glyphosate is keeping Britain farming – it’s as simple as that. And despite what those misinformed activists who are demonising it are saying, 80% or more of the glyphosate that’s applied in the UK never actually touches or comes into contact with the growing crop.”³⁸

The NFU is encouraging farmers to write to their MPs and MEPs on this issue.

4.3 The views from NGOs

Meanwhile, NGOs such as GreenPeace feel that there has been an over-reliance on industry research when there are other peer-reviewed studies that point to glyphosate causing cancer. GreenPeace, for example, has called for a glyphosate exit plan:

Greenpeace EU food policy director Franziska Achterberg said: “The Commission is about to give glyphosate an unreasonable grace period, which will continue to leave people and nature exposed to the controversial weedkiller. It should use this time to draw up a glyphosate exit plan. Glyphosate is the most widely used herbicide in Europe and has been linked to serious health concerns and loss of wildlife. It’s time for Europe to plan for a glyphosate-free future.”³⁹

The Soil Association too campaigns against glyphosate, citing concerns about the health effects of glyphosate residues in food, particularly bread.⁴⁰ Similarly, [Friends of the Earth have argued](#) that a ban on glyphosate could make farming greener.⁴¹

³⁷ [Stand up for UK agriculture and save Glyphosate from being banned by false knowledge and ignorance](#), 38degrees.org.uk

³⁸ “[Farmers join forces to fight ‘false knowledge’ on glyphosate](#)”, *Farmers Weekly* online, 27 February 2017

³⁹ GreenPeace, [Press release: Commission must prepare glyphosate exit plan](#), 24 June 2016

⁴⁰ Soil Association, [What is glyphosate?](#), accessed 27 June 2017

⁴¹ Friends of the Earth Europe, [Glyphosate ban could green European farming](#), 19 May 2016

5. Glyphosate residues

EU countries monitor the national diet for pesticide residues. Details of the UK's residue monitoring programme are on the gov.uk website:

EU countries ... have a national monitoring programme. The UK programme ensures all the major components of our national diet are sampled (milk, bread, potatoes, fruit and vegetables, cereals and related products, and animal products). The programme is not designed to provide a representation of residues in our diet – it is risk-based and looks more at those commodities likely to contain residues. Some commodities are surveyed every year, whilst others are surveyed less frequently, for example once every three years.

Samples from retailers (supermarkets, independent shops and market stalls) are bought from across the UK by trained purchasers from a market research company.

[...]

We test for a range of pesticides in the following food groups:

- fruit and vegetables
- animal products
- cereal products
- infant food⁴²

In [answer to a PQ](#) in September 2015, Lord Gardiner of Kimble described the Government's testing regime for glyphosate residue and some instances of residues being above the level that would be expected when a pesticide is used in accordance with its authorisation.⁴³

Defra's Expert Committee on pesticide residues in food (PRiF)'s [most recent annual report, covering 2015](#) summarises its main findings:

1. 3,614 samples of 47 different types of food were collected in 2015.
2. 42.86% of these samples contained at least one residue.
3. We tested for up to 388 pesticides in fruit and vegetables, 73 in animal products, 346 in starchy foods and grains, 353 in infant food and 346 in other groceries.
4. All the samples in which a residue was detected were checked by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) for risk to consumers by means of a risk assessment screening mechanism. We published results of 21 detailed and 2 combined risk assessments where there was a concern for human health.
5. We referred 8 samples to the Food Standards Agency (FSA) as we had concerns about the potential risk to the health of people eating these foods. The FSA notified the European Commission about these samples who then

⁴² DEFRA and the Health and Safety Executive, [Pesticide residues in food: results of monitoring programme](#), updated 8 September 2016

⁴³ [PQ HL2244, 28 September 2015](#). Maximum residue level or MRL. A residue level higher than the relevant MRL does not (Lord Kimble said) necessarily indicate an unacceptable risk to consumers.

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notified all the countries which are members of the Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF).

6. We referred 16 samples of UK produced fruit and vegetables to HSE as they contained residues of pesticides not approved for use in the UK on those crops. Where HSE could not identify an obvious reason for the residue they then investigated how these residues could have arisen.⁴⁴

As the [POSTnote on herbicide resistance](#) points out, PRiF has argued that the risks of pesticide residue are outweighed by the benefits of eating five portions of fruit and vegetables a day:

Defra's expert committee Pesticide Residues in Food (PRiF) monitors pesticide residues on UK food samples. Herbicide residue has been detected above the maximum permitted levels.¹⁹ However, PRiF advises that the health benefits from five portions of fruit and vegetables each day outweigh any risks from pesticide residues.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ PRiF, [Annual Report 2015](#): Executive Summary

⁴⁵ POSTnote 501, [Herbicide resistance](#), August 2015

6. What impact might Brexit have?

The details of the Government's approach to agriculture – and more specifically to pesticide regulation post-Brexit - have yet to emerge. The UK Government has not said that, following the UK's departure from the EU, it will change its stance on glyphosate, but the UK has not always taken the same view as the Commission, so it is possible that there might be a different approach with greater UK freedom. The EEA model does, though, require adopting some pesticide approval and marketing regulations, so the freedom will depend on the exit model the UK adopts.

Concerns about the future of pesticide regulation have been amplified by the UK's decision to leave the EU.

In the [Brexit white paper](#) published in February 2017, the Government set out its approach to agriculture, fisheries and food. It confirmed that the UK would not be seeking to remain in the Single Market and argued that Brexit presented an opportunity to create a "world-leading" food and farming industry.⁴⁶

Some remarks by DEFRA minister George Eustice before the referendum and the response to a PQ in May 2016 about glyphosate, though, might perhaps give some indication of the Government's likely approach.

In May last year, [George Eustice was reported as saying](#) that the EU's precautionary principle needed to be reformed in favour of a US style, risk-based approach, allowing faster authorisation of pesticides.⁴⁷ Also in May 2016, [the Government indicated](#) that it would prefer Member States to decide on such restrictions as part of their own national re-approval processes:

The Government recognises the importance of effective pesticides and believes that they should be authorised where the scientific evidence shows they do not pose unacceptable risks to human health or the environment.

[...]

It should be for Member States to consider whether restrictions are needed for particular glyphosate products in particular circumstances. This would form part of the normal product re-assessment process.⁴⁸

Similarly, in response to a [PQ in October last year](#), George Eustice again spoke of the need for decisions to be based on the level of identified risk.⁴⁹

More recently, [Lord Gardiner of Kimble has again argued](#) for an approach based on risk assessment, saying that protection of people and the environment will be the highest priority:

⁴⁶ [The UK's exit from and new partnership with the European Union](#), CM 9417, February 2017: pages 36-41

⁴⁷ "[Brexit would free UK from 'spirit-crushing' green directives, says minister](#)", *Guardian* online, 30 May 2016

⁴⁸ [HL Written Question HL8171, 11 May 2016](#)

⁴⁹ [PQ 49293, 26 October 2016](#)

18 Glyphosate: controversy around the EU's re-approval of the pesticide

While the UK remains a member of the EU, we will continue to meet our obligations under EU law. [...] As part of the preparation for EU exit, we are considering future arrangements for pesticides. Our highest priority will continue to be the protection of people and the environment.

The Government remains of the view that decisions on the use of neonicotinoids and other pesticides should be based on a careful scientific assessment of the risks. Pesticides that carry unacceptable risks to bees, other pollinators and the environment should not be authorised.⁵⁰

This might therefore indicate that the Government could be minded to take a very different approach to pesticides approval with any opportunity for more UK autonomy, although (obviously) much would depend on the terms agreed on exit.

⁵⁰ [HL Written Question HL5196, 8 February 2017](#)

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