

# Conflict of Interest Concerns Cloud Glyphosate Review

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**By Carey Gillam**

It's been a little more than a year since the World Health Organization's (WHO) cancer research experts upended the agrichemical industry's favorite child. The group, the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) declared the globe's most widely used herbicide – glyphosate – to be a probable human carcinogen.

Since then, Monsanto Co., which draws roughly a third of its \$15 billion in annual revenues from its Roundup branded glyphosate-based herbicide products, (and much of the rest from glyphosate-tolerant crop technology) has been on a mission to invalidate the IARC finding. Through an army of foot soldiers that include industry executives, public relation professionals and public university scientists, the company has called for a rebuke of IARC's work on glyphosate.

How successful those efforts will or will not be is still an open question. But some answers are expected following a meeting being held this week in Geneva, Switzerland. An "international expert scientific group" known as JMPR is reviewing IARC's work on glyphosate, and the results are expected to offer regulators around the world a guide for how to view glyphosate.

The group, officially known as the Joint FAO-WHO Meeting on Pesticide Residues (JMPR), is administered jointly by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and WHO. JMPR meets regularly to review residues and analytical aspects of pesticides, to estimate maximum residue levels, and to review toxicological data and estimate acceptable daily intakes (ADIs) for humans.

After this week's meeting, set to run from May 9-13, JMPR is expected to issue a series of recommendations that will then go to the FAO/WHO Codex Alimentarius Commission. The Codex Alimentarius was established by FAO and the World Health Organization develops harmonized international food standards as a means to protect consumer health and promote fair practices in food trade.

The meeting comes as both European and U.S. regulators are wrestling with their own assessments and how to react to the IARC classification. It also comes as Monsanto looks for backing for its claims of glyphosate safety.

Glyphosate is not just a lynchpin for sales of the company's herbicides but also for its genetically modified seeds designed to tolerate being sprayed with glyphosate. The company also is currently defending itself against several lawsuits in which farmworkers and others allege they contracted cancer linked to glyphosate and that Monsanto knew of, but hid, the risks. And, a rebuke of IARC's glyphosate classification could help the company in its lawsuit against the state of California, which aims to stop the state from following the IARC classification with a similar designation.

Depending on the result of the JMPR, the Codex will decide on any actions necessary regarding glyphosate, said WHO spokesperson Tarik Jasarevic.

"It is the JMPR's function to conduct risk assessment for agricultural use and assessing the health risks to consumers from residues found in food," said Jasarevic

The outcome of the JMPR meeting is being watched closely by a number of environmental and consumer groups that want to see new safety standards for glyphosate. And not without some worry. The coalition, which includes the Natural Resources Defense Council and Friends of the Earth, has expressed concern about apparent conflicts of interest on the expert advisory panel. Some individuals appear to have financial and professional ties to Monsanto and the chemical industry, according to the coalition.

The coalition specifically cited concerns with member ties to the nonprofit International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI), which is funded by Monsanto and other chemical, food and drug companies. The Institute's board of trustees includes executives from Monsanto, Syngenta, DuPont, Nestle and others, while its list of member and supporting companies includes those and many more global food and chemical concerns.

Internal ILSI documents, obtained by a state public records request, suggest that ILSI has been generously funded by the agrichemical industry. One document that appears to be ILSI's 2012 major donor list shows total contributions of \$2.4 million, with more than \$500,000 each from CropLife International and from Monsanto.

"We have significant concerns that the committee will be unduly influenced by the overall pesticide industry and particularly Monsanto- the largest producer of glyphosate in the world,"

the coalition told WHO in a letter last year.

One such JMPR experts is Alan Boobis, professor of biochemical pharmacology and director of the toxicology unit in the faculty of medicine at Imperial College London. He is a member and a past chairman of the board of trustees of ILSI, vice-president of ILSI Europe and chair of ILSI.

Another member is Angelo Moretto, Director of the International Centre for Pesticides and Health Risks Prevention at “Luigi Sacco” Hospital of the ASST Fatebenefratelli Sacco, in Milan, Italy. The coalition said that Moretto has been involved in various projects with ILSI and has served as a member of the steering team for an ILSI project on risks of chemical exposures financed by agricultural companies that included Monsanto.

Another is Aldert Piersma, a senior scientist at the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment in the Netherlands and an advisor to projects of ILSI’s Health and Environmental Sciences Institute.

In all the JMPR list of experts totals 18. Jasarevic said that the roster of experts are chosen from a group of individuals who expressed interest in being involved, and all are “independent and are selected based on their scientific excellence, as well as on their experience in the field of pesticide risk assessment.”

Aaron Blair, a scientist emeritus at the National Cancer Institute and the chairman of the IARC group that made the glyphosate classification, has defended IARC’s work as based on a thorough scientific review. He said he had no concerns to discuss regarding the JMPR review of IARC’s work.

“I am sure the evaluation by the joint FAO/WHO group will make the reasons for their evaluation clear, which is what is critical for the press and public,” he said.

The world is waiting.

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