

## **APSE briefing: Glyphosate- Where do local authorities stand?**

This briefing is provided to all APSE member authorities but will be of particular interest to those officers responsible for grounds maintenance, parks and street cleansing services.

### **Key Issues:**

- Following the publication of a report from the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) in 2015 which found that glyphosate was “a probable human carcinogen”, there has been a great deal of debate across the world as to whether the herbicides which include glyphosate are safe to use.
- This debate has been heightened by recent court rulings in the United States which have awarded multi-million dollar damages to citizens who have claimed continued use of glyphosate has caused them to develop cancer.
- National agencies across the world have declared glyphosate to be safe to use, suggesting it poses no threat. However some countries have now decided to ban glyphosate or severely curtail its use.
- Regarding the UK, it continues to say glyphosate based products are safe to use, but local authorities now find themselves caught between legal advice and the moral question of knowing there have been successful claims that glyphosate has caused cancers.
- APSE has therefore produced this briefing note, itself taking legal advice, as to where local authorities stand in this situation.

### **Background**

The mention of glyphosate tends to drive people into two camps: those who advocate its use as a cheap, effective and readily available herbicide, essential to grounds maintenance and agricultural practices all over the country, and a second group who see it as a potentially dangerous carcinogenic substance which should be banned from use.

Glyphosate as a product is rarely used on its own, but as part of a group of chemicals in products such as Roundup, Pathclear or Weedol, which in themselves are far more toxic than glyphosate on its own.

Local authorities across the country still use glyphosate-based products in large quantities, despite calls to reduce chemical use and move towards a more integrated weed management approach.

There are few alternatives to glyphosate and even those which are seen as alternatives are often still in a pilot phase and much more expensive to use, which considering the budget cuts many local authority parks and grounds maintenance services have suffered, do not make these products attractive.

However, recent United States court rulings against Monsanto, the supplier of one of the world's leading glyphosate-based products, Roundup, has led to the awarding of millions of dollars in damages to plaintiffs who claim to have contracted cancer as a result of the prolonged use of glyphosate-based products. Currently there are over 18,400 lawsuits alleging links between Roundup pesticide and cancer going through, or about to go through the US courts. This situation has led many users to reconsider glyphosate's safety as well as the possibility of legal actions being taken against them.

These concerns has resulted in some UK local authorities joining a growing group of organisations and countries around the world which have banned the use of glyphosate and glyphosate-based herbicides.

Therefore the question has to be asked, where does a local authority stand in relation to using a European Union licenced product which has scientific backing as being safe to use, against the possibility of legal action being taken by employees or residents who claim the use of glyphosate has given them cancer.

## **Safety concerns**

The original safety concerns over the dangers from glyphosate came out of a report from the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) in 2015 which found that glyphosate was "a probable human carcinogen".

This report has been roundly attacked by the manufacturers of glyphosate and called into question by many countries' regulatory bodies which argue that glyphosate is safe to use; it has over 40 years of use and 800 studies behind it. However, critics of glyphosate state that many of these studies can be called into question, as a large proportion were commissioned by the industry which created glyphosate and therefore cannot be trusted.

Despite assurances from national and regulatory bodies (such as the European Food Safety Authority) some UK local authorities have taken the decision to either ban glyphosate and glyphosate-based herbicide use totally, or at least in specific areas, such as schools, playgrounds, parks and pavements i.e. areas where there is a high public footfall or where high risk groups are present.

Against such a complicated and conflicting catalogue of information, where do local authorities stand in relation to the continued use of glyphosate-based products whilst at the same time being aware of the potential hazards and legal implications of using this herbicide?

### **Where do local authorities stand?**

Claims to date have mainly been against the suppliers. For instance, in the US, a groundskeeper at a California county school was awarded \$79 million after arguing that his cancer was caused by several years of exposure to Roundup. As noted above, there are numerous other claims ongoing in the US and we are now also seeing litigation outside of the US. A recent claim has been brought in Australia against Bayer (the parent company of Monsanto) claiming that glyphosate was linked to a claimant's cancer. In addition to this claim there are also reportedly landscape gardeners, council workers and farmers seeking to bring further lawsuits.

As the use of glyphosate-based products is still legal in the UK (glyphosate is an approved active substance on the EU Pesticides Database until 15 December 2022), local authorities cannot be criminally prosecuted simply for using these products. Nevertheless, the Health and Safety Executive (**HSE**) enforce regulations relating to the advertisement, sale, storage, supply and use of pesticides as part of a work activity to ensure the health and safety of employees and persons affected by such work activity is protected. Local authorities themselves are required to enforce controls in respect of the advertisement, sale, supply, storage and use of pesticides for those areas not under the HSE's jurisdiction, including sports grounds, gardens and parks.

In particular, the Plant Protection Products (Sustainable Use) Regulations 2012 (**the Regulations**) require a person who uses or permits an individual to use a plant protection product (pesticide) to ensure that all reasonable precautions are taken to protect human health and the environment and specifically notes that the amount of pesticide used and the frequency of use must be as low as reasonably practicable when pesticides are used in areas used by the general public or by vulnerable groups. Failure to comply with the Regulations, as well as general health and safety legislation requiring an organisation to protect the health, safety and welfare of its employees and those affected by their undertaking, can result in a criminal prosecution and fine.

It is therefore imperative that local authorities using glyphosate products are aware of their legal obligations and continue to use these pesticides accordingly. Conducting thorough risk assessments to understand the impact of using these products and putting in place suitable control measures, including the provision of information, instruction, training and personal protective equipment to persons using pesticides directly is fundamental.

Local authorities should also consider the possibility that future civil claims could be made against them by persons exposed to glyphosate-based products. Much like asbestos-related claims, if it can be proven that exposure to glyphosate during the course of employment has links to cancer, there may be the possibility of a compensation claim. The robustness of the risk assessments undertaken and control measures implemented by local authorities will therefore be fundamental to ensuring any such claims can be prevented or challenged in the future.

For members of the public, such as park users, it is likely to be much more difficult (although not necessarily impossible) for them to establish that regularly using a park treated with Roundup or another glyphosate-based product would have caused or contributed to their cancer therefore limiting the ability for successful claims against local authorities. Nevertheless, local authorities should note increasing pressure from resident groups and other interested parties have been seen elsewhere, with members of the public campaigning for organic pesticides to be used or for no pesticides to be used.

In New York, legislation has been introduced to ban glyphosate-based products from public parks and other properties. Other countries, such as Italy and Portugal, have also

imposed bans on the use of glyphosate-based products in public areas. France and Germany, are seeking to phase-in prohibitions on glyphosate use.

In the UK, a number of local authorities have taken their own steps to impose restrictions on the use of glyphosate-based products and other pesticides and herbicides. For example Croydon, Lewes, Glastonbury, Wadebridge and the London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham are all reportedly banning the use glyphosate-based products in public areas.

Whilst glyphosate currently remains an approved pesticide in the EU, in light of the successful prosecutions around the world and the growing concerns about glyphosate, it may be prudent for all local authorities to carefully consider the scale of glyphosate use, the likely risks arising, the potential to limit the reliance on glyphosate-based products and the ability to find a suitable alternative product to prepare for the future.

### **Financial implications**

Banning glyphosate-based products will come at a cost. The Crop Protection Agency (whose members include major producers of pesticides and herbicides) stated that banning glyphosate-based products would cost councils an estimated £228 million in higher costs to use alternatives. There may also be additional costs involved in terminating contracts and re-procuring alternatives.

The anti-glyphosate lobby argue that there are organic methods to manage weeds and use manual or other mechanical methods (such as foamstream). However, these alternatives also have cost implications for local authorities and glyphosate-based products remain particularly cost-effective for invasive type weeds.

At this stage, local authorities have a choice. The continued use of glyphosate products responsibly (and in accordance with legal requirements) is permitted and allows for a cost effective solution to the need for pesticide use. Alternatively, local authorities may feel public pressure to limit the use of glyphosate products, or ban their use entirely. Either way, all local authorities need to give serious consideration to the future of using glyphosate products.

As the levels of public interest surrounding these products and the number of successful claims continues to grow, the risk of the products being banned in the EU increases as, no doubt, does the appetite of potential claimants. Local authorities should take the

opportunity whilst the use of glyphosate remains lawful to identify an appropriate, cost effective solution and potential alternative products to ensure the financial implications of using glyphosate can be appropriately managed.

As a footnote, Bayer has recently committed to spend £5.6 billion on weed killer research which will reduce its environmental impact by up to 30% through more targeted and reduced use of chemicals. In addition, Bayer has recently signed an agreement with a UK company for exclusive world-wide rights to commercialise its pollinator friendly bioinsecticide. Therefore whilst still claiming there is a place for glyphosate, Bayer are clearly looking at alternative and more nature-based products.

### **APSE Comment**

Unfortunately there is no right or wrong answer to the question is it safe to continue to use glyphosate products.

Some will argue that 40 years evidence proves it is safe to use whilst others will argue a good deal of the research which proves this has come from the manufactures of glyphosate.

There is the issue of successful claims in court that the continued use of glyphosate has led to cancer together with thousands more cases awaiting judgement. There is also the concern that these claims are now appearing in several countries across the globe and if such a case were to be brought in the UK, whether Local Authorities would be able to cope with paying any damages awarded against them, as well as the cost of finding alternatives.

Equally now that we have seen this 'link', proven or not, then morally should we continue using a product which although highly effective and affordable, could potential pose a threat to our residents.

It appears the only realistic option at the moment, until affordable and effective alternatives can be found is to use glyphosate products as sparingly as possible and away from high public footfall areas. The adoption of more integrated weed control approaches is clearly the way to go as this reduces exposure to chemicals and can also improve levels of biodiversity. Obviously there may be a need for the public to accept higher levels of

weeds as a result, but perhaps this is a price they would be willing to accept if it means the potential threat from chemical spraying can be avoided.

Despite protestations from the manufacturers of glyphosate that they are being unfairly treated and the claims are based more on public opinion rather than hard scientific facts, they are now looking at more natural weed and pest control methodologies such as bioinsecticides, which perhaps in the long-run will be the most positive outcome of this debate.

***APSE thanks Walker Morris, LLP for their guidance and advice on this briefing. This briefing does not constitute direct legal advice to local authorities and local authorities and other parties should always secure their own independent legal advice on the matters of litigation, risk and health and safety of workers and the public referred to in this briefing.***

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