

## Question time: Reducing the use of pesticides and strengthening consumer protection

The European Parliament has a range of supervisory and control powers, allowing it to exercise oversight over other European Union institutions. To strengthen this oversight, Parliament has revived the practice of holding 'question time' with the European Commission and the High Representative during plenary sessions. For the June I session, questions to the Commission will concern pesticide use and consumer protection.

### Context

Without pesticides (insecticides, fungicides and herbicides) – also known as plant protection products (PPPs) – crops can be lost to insects, diseases and weeds. Agricultural pesticides are therefore important to ensure good yields and quality crops. Despite the increasing awareness of their harmful effects to humans, animals and the environment, modern agriculture relies heavily on pesticides, and PPPs are used against plant pests and for weed control in agriculture, forestry and green urban areas.

Multiple epidemiological studies [suggest](#) that exposure to pesticides may present a potentially important environmental risk factor, for example for developing Parkinson's disease. Residents living close to agricultural land [might be exposed](#) to pesticides through non-occupational pathways, including spray drift and volatilisation of pesticides beyond the treated area. The latest annual report from the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) on [pesticide residues in food](#) covers more than 88 000 food samples, collected in the European Union in 2020. Analysis of the results shows that 94.9 % of samples fell within legally permitted levels. Legal limits for pesticide residues in food are covered by [Regulation \(EC\) No 396/2005](#), which also contains provisions on [official controls](#) on pesticide residues in food, both for produce treated within the EU and for imported produce.

The EU has comprehensive chemicals legislation, spearheaded by [REACH](#), which aims to ensure a high level of protection of human health and the environment. Groups of chemicals, such as [biocides](#), [pesticides](#), [pharmaceuticals](#) or [cosmetics](#), are covered by specific legislation. In addition, the Commission is addressing challenges posed by [endocrine disruptors](#), chemicals that interfere with the hormone system causing adverse health effects. Examples of endocrine active substances sometimes found in food include several pesticides, environmental pollutants like dioxins, and the [food contact material](#), bisphenol A.

Placing on the market and use of pesticides is subject to a strict regulatory regime, set out in [Regulation \(EC\) No 1107/2009](#). Pesticides undergo a [dual authorisation process](#): active substances are authorised at EU level, and plant protection products are then authorised at national level. [Directive 2009/128/EC](#) on the sustainable use of pesticides ('SUD') requires Member States to adopt [national action plans](#) to reduce risks from the use of pesticides, to promote [integrated pest management](#) and to progressively replace the most dangerous pesticides with low-risk alternatives. National action plans include measures to minimise or prohibit the use of pesticides in specific areas, including playgrounds, to reduce exposure of humans.

### European Commission commitments

The Commissioner for Health and Food Safety, Stella Kyriakides, [committed in her hearing](#) before the Parliament in October 2019 to decreasing dependence on pesticides and to invest and encourage the finding of low risk alternatives, noting 'We cannot have an effective farm to fork strategy or an effective Green Deal if we are not facing and able to face and deal with issues such as pesticides'. Executive Vice President Frans Timmermans [declared](#), 'Europe needs to move forward towards a zero-pollution environment to tackle environmental degradation and pollution, address air and water quality, hazardous chemicals, industrial emissions, pesticides, endocrine disruptors and microplastics'. The von der Leyen Commission's [six policy priorities](#) include protecting the environment, under the European Green Deal priority, and the 'Strengthening a Europe that protects' initiative.

## Delivery on commitments

A [REFIT evaluation](#) of EU legislation on PPPs and pesticide residues was finalised in October 2018. However, available [Eurostat data](#) show that sales of pesticides in the EU have remained more or less stable since 2011 and that uptake of non-chemical pesticides is low.

The European Commission published a [chemicals strategy for sustainability](#) on 14 October 2020. Part of the EU's zero pollution ambition, it is a key [European Green Deal](#) commitment. Under the [2023-2027](#) common agricultural policy (CAP) [conditionality rules](#), beneficiaries' payments are linked to a set of obligations, some of which arise from the [Nitrates Directive](#) and the SUD.

The European Commission [work programme for 2022](#) includes a [revision of the SUD](#). This seeks to align the directive with the objectives of reducing the use and risk of pesticides by 50 %, and the use of more hazardous pesticides by 50 % by 2030, as set out in the EU [farm to fork](#) and [biodiversity strategies](#), core European Green Deal elements. The legislative proposal was expected in the first quarter of 2022, but due to urgent measures regarding the war in Ukraine, its publication was delayed and is now tentatively planned for 22 June 2022.

## Coming challenges

During the previous legislative term, the European Parliament adopted a [resolution](#) on the implementation of SUD in February 2019. Members regretted that most EU countries had not succeeded in significantly promoting alternative techniques and reducing the risk and use of pesticides. The resolution noted that only five countries had established measurable targets regarding pesticides. In its 2021 [resolution](#) on the farm to fork strategy, Parliament expressed support for binding pesticide reduction targets. It also called for action to improve the pesticide approval process and its implementation. In its 2020 appraisal [report](#), the EU Court of Auditors concluded that progress in measuring and reducing the associated risks of PPP use has been limited.

In its [inception impact assessment](#) on the SUD, the Commission admits that lack of data (e.g. on pesticide sales at disaggregated level and use of pesticides) currently hampers efforts to evaluate progress. The Commission indicates that the issue will be addressed in the framework regulation on statistics on agricultural input and output (including pesticide statistics), currently under [interinstitutional negotiation](#) between the Parliament and the Council, with a [provisional agreement](#) reached on 2 June 2022. Restricting pesticide use in non-agricultural contexts could also have an impact, for example, in pesticide use on airport runways and railway lines, in parks and sporting facilities. Adapting to new legislative obligations could impose costs upon farmers and other economic operators.

In a recent [report](#), the environmental NGO Pesticide Action Network (PAN) contradicts official claims that toxic pesticide use is declining, and accuses EU Member States of complete failure in implementing EU regulations aiming to protect consumers. PAN claims the use of the most dangerous pesticides in Europe is rising, and that laws are being ignored and consumers exposed to a rising tide of chemical exposure.

The use of one of the recently most controversial active substances in pesticides, glyphosate, is [currently approved](#) in the EU until 15 December 2022. In May 2019, the Commission appointed four Member States (France, Hungary, the Netherlands and Sweden) to act jointly as 'rapporteurs' for the [next assessment](#) of glyphosate. This assessment group submitted its assessments to EFSA and the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) in June 2021. During the public consultations, which ended in November 2021, a number of NGOs submitted an open letter to Commissioner Stella Kyriakides highlighting their concerns about the assessment procedure and about the credibility of studies submitted in the renewal dossier.

In May 2022, EFSA and ECHA announced a delay in the process, given the volume of new information received through the public consultation. ECHA published a [statement](#) on 30 May 2022, concluding that classifying glyphosate as a carcinogen is unjustified. This prompted angry reactions from health and environment groups. EFSA's risk assessment is now expected to be ready in July 2023. For these reasons, current EU authorisation – due to expire in December 2022 – may be extended, possibly by a year.

