Health Canada launches consultations on glyphosates as debate continues
By Kelsey Johnson | Apr 14, 2015 11:23 am |

Health Canada has launched a public consultation on the labelling of the world’s most widely used weed killer, but says the popular pesticide ingredient is not a risk to human health if used properly.

Late Monday, Health Canada said it wants to review the labelling of products containing glyphosate, sold as Roundup™ and Vision™. Glyphosate is used by farmers and others, like the forestry industry, to fight weeds.

The department reiterated glyphosate are not a human health risk when the instructions on the labels are followed properly.

The public consultation, which runs until June 12, is on new labels for products that contain glyphosate. Among the suggestions are clearer application instructions and the introduction of a restricted entry interval of 12 hours for agricultural workers. The new labels were developed in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the department said.

Restricted entry intervals are already in place for some pesticides. The USDA defines the interval limits as restricted access to areas that have just been sprayed with the pesticide for a certain period of time, typically 12 hours, until the chemical has dissipated or been absorbed by the plant.

Word of the public consultation comes just weeks after researchers with the World Health Organization’s International Agency for Research on Cancer suggested glyphosates are a carcinogenic. The chemical, researchers said, “probably” causes cancer and will be classified as such.

The WHO study linked the weed killer to a higher risk of non-hodgkins lymphoma in individuals who are exposed to the chemical in their occupation.
The health organization’s conclusion was based on studies of exposure, mostly in agriculture, from the US, Canada, and Sweden that have been published since 2001.

On Monday, Health Canada directly contradicted the WHO’s findings. In a statement on the Pest Management Regulatory Agency’s website, the agency said the WHO had not considered the “level of human exposure” in its study.

“Pesticides are registered for use in Canada only if the level of exposure to Canadians does not cause any harmful effects, including cancer,” the PMRA said.

Farmers, toxicologists, several international glyphosate task forces and pesticide companies like Monsanto have also widely criticized the study’s findings, insisting the WHO’s conclusions are not based on scientific data. The global agri-chemical behemoth Monsanto, which manufactures Roundup and Vision, has also accused the WHO of ignoring other relevant studies about the effects of glyphosate.

“We join fellow members of both the EU and U.S. glyphosate task forces in our disagreement with this classification for several reasons,” Monsanto Vice President Dr. Phillip Miller said in a March 20 release, adding the WHO’s conclusion was a “dramatic departure” from the previous findings by “all regulatory agencies around the globe.”

“There is no new research or data that was used,” Miller said. “The most relevant, scientific data was excluded from review; the conclusion is not supported by scientific data; and there is no link between glyphosate and an increase in cancer when the full data set is included in a rigorous review.”

Glyphosphates have been approved for safe use in both Canada and the United States. Health Canada was ordered by the court to reconsider its decision to not conduct a special review of the pesticide in 2011 after concerns were raised by a member of the public about the impact glyphosate had on amphibians.

The Pest Management Regulatory Agency, Canada’s main pesticide regulator, would adhere to the court’s request in December 2012. After reconsideration, the PMRA, again, determined a special review was not required.

Health Canada is seeking public consultation on the following labelling suggestions:
• A requirement for a statement indicating to apply only when the potential for drift to residential or populated areas is minimal. This includes houses, cottages, schools and recreational areas;
• A restricted entry interval (REI) of 12 hours for agricultural uses to better protect agricultural workers;
• New environmental hazard statements to inform users that, at high enough doses, it can be toxic to non-target species;
• Recommended spray buffer zones to protect non-target terrestrial and aquatic habitats from unintended exposure; and,
• Precautionary statements to reduce the potential for run-off of glyphosate to adjacent aquatic habitats, particularly when heavy rain is forecasted. This includes a recommendation to keep a strip of vegetation between the treatment area and the edge of a water body to reduce runoff of glyphosate to aquatic areas.