

Glyphosate herbicides

Information for employers about minimising risks to employees and others when using herbicides such as glyphosate.

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Background

Glyphosate has the highest worldwide production volume of all herbicides and is widely used in agriculture and domestically. Glyphosate products (eg 'Roundup') are registered by the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority (APVMA) and have been used in Australia for more than 40 years.

In March 2015, the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) announced that it had reclassified the herbicide glyphosate, from 'possibly carcinogenic to humans' (Group 2B) to 'probably carcinogenic to humans' (Group 2A). In contrast, a subsequent assessment by the European Food Safety Agency concluded that glyphosate is unlikely to pose a carcinogenic hazard to humans and that the evidence does not support classification with regard to its carcinogenic potential.

Recently, the AVPMA completed its assessment of the IARC report and other recent assessments of glyphosate and has concluded that glyphosate does not pose a cancer risk to humans. Consequently, the current assessment of the APVMA is that products containing glyphosate are safe to use as per the label instructions.

While the levels of risk to human health posed by glyphosate remains a matter of some debate among international health and regulatory bodies, WorkSafe believes it is appropriate to provide information to Victorian employers about the issue regarding the classification of glyphosate and to remind employers of their occupational health and safety duties relating to the use of this chemical.

Duties of manufacturers and importing suppliers

Under Part 4.1 of the Victorian Occupational Health and Safety Regulations 2017 (OHS Regulations), a manufacturer or importing supplier of a hazardous substance, such as glyphosate, must prepare a safety data sheet (SDS) that contains information in accordance with regulation 145. The SDS must contain accurate and current information and be reviewed at least every five years.

A manufacturer or importing supplier of a hazardous substance must also label containers in accordance with regulation 149 and accurately reflect the current classification and state of knowledge about any identified hazards associated with the substance. In Australia, the registration and labelling of agricultural chemicals (such as glyphosate) is also regulated by the APVMA. Regulation 150 of the OHS Regulations recognises APVMA approved labels as being compliant providing the label also contains additional hazard and precautionary information relating to the substances classification under the Globally Harmonized System of Classification and Labelling of Chemicals (GHS).

Duties of employers

Employers are required to ensure they have the up-to-date SDS for any glyphosate containing products, and if necessary, obtain an updated SDS from their supplier as soon as possible.

Employers must also control any risk to health associated with the use of glyphosate in accordance with a hierarchy of control measures (regulation 163). Specifically, employers must consider whether any risk can be eliminated, so far as is reasonably practicable. If this is not reasonably practicable, employers must reduce the risk by substitution, isolation of employees from the source of exposure, by using engineering controls or a combination of these. This includes considering whether:

- the use of the glyphosate can be eliminated by use of alternative weed control methods (such as mechanical slashing) that present lower risks
- a registered ready-to-use diluted form of the herbicide is available, or
- the herbicide may be applied by a means which will not generate an aerosol (such as a weed wand, coarse spray or low- to-ground spray technique).

Spraying should also be avoided during very windy conditions to minimise the possibility of exposure to spray drift.

In addition, appropriate personal protective equipment (to prevent inhalation of spray and skin contact) must be provided by employers and worn during mixing and spraying.

The OHS Regulations sets out how employers must ensure that any measures implemented to control risks in relation to glyphosate containing products in the workplace are reviewed and, if necessary, revised (regulation 164).

Section 21(2)(e) of the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004 (OHS Act) requires employers to provide employees with such information, instruction, training or supervision necessary to perform their work in a way that is safe and without risk to health. This includes instruction and training to minimise the risk of accidental exposure to glyphosate, particularly when concentrates are being handled, and instructions to follow all handling procedures detailed on the APVMA approved label on the container.

The OHS Act also requires that employers (section 23) and self-employed persons (section 24) must, so far as is reasonably practicable, ensure that persons other than employees are not exposed to risks to their health and safety as a result of their activities. As such, employers and self-employed persons must ensure that they implement control measures to minimise the risks to the general public if hazardous substances such as glyphosate are used in public areas.

Further information

APVMA (2015) Glyphosate.

Available from <http://apvma.gov.au/node/13891>

WorkSafe Victoria (2015) - Checklist for spraying pesticides – Risk assessment tool for employers

Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004.

Occupational Health and Safety Regulations 2017

<http://www.legislation.vic.gov.au>

Contact Details

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For more information on occupational health and safety, go to WorkSafe's website:

worksafe.vic.gov.au

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This guidance has been reviewed and updated for the sole purpose of amending year and regulation references relating to the Occupational Health and Safety Regulations, in line with amendments which came into effect on 18 June 2017.