



# Policy briefing:

How a ban on the use of glyphosate as a pre-harvest desiccant would help the UK meet pesticide reduction commitments made under the Pesticides National Action Plan and the Global Biodiversity Framework



# Introduction

This briefing outlines the case for the UK government to introduce legislation that prohibits the use of glyphosate as a pre-harvest desiccant to control the time point of harvest or optimise threshing. These restrictions on the use of glyphosate already exist in the EU.

Although the EU renewed its approval of the active substance glyphosate in November 2023 through Commission Regulation 2023/2660, it imposed certain restrictions on conditions of use, stating that *“uses for desiccation to control the time point of harvest or to optimise threshing shall not be authorised”*. Such uses are considered to fall outside the definition of *“proper use”* of plant protection products outlined in EU Regulation (EC) No 1107/2009 on the placing of plant protection products on the market.



Alignment with EU legislation on pesticides is currently a key negotiating factor in the development of a UK-EU Common Sanitary and Phytosanitary Area. Alignment should extend to conditions of use and include a prohibition on the use of glyphosate for pre-harvest desiccation.

A ban on pre-harvest desiccant use of glyphosate would facilitate the UK moving swiftly towards meeting objectives outlined in the UK Pesticides National Action Plan to reduce the impact of pesticides on the UK environment by 10% by 2030. It would also support its commitment to Target 7 of the United Nations' Convention on Biological Diversity's Global Biodiversity Framework's target to reduce the overall risk from pesticides by at least a half by 2030.

# Glyphosate restrictions would help the government meet its objectives under the NAP

The UK Pesticides National Action Plan 2025 (NAP), published by the UK Government's Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra), Welsh Government, The Scottish Government and Northern Ireland Executive, in March 2025 *"seeks to minimise the risks and impacts of pesticide use on the environment and human health, while supporting agricultural productivity"*.

It recognises the risk pesticides pose to *"biodiversity loss and unacceptable human exposure levels"* and commits UK governments to *"reducing the risks of pesticide use"* with the aim of promoting *"the sustainable use of pesticides to minimise impacts on the environment and human health"*.

The National Action Plan also includes a target to reduce the impact of pesticides on the UK environment by at least 10% by 2030 across 20 metrics, which together make up a pesticide's Load Indicator. The Pesticide Load Indicator combines data on pesticide usage with information on a substance's toxicity to non-target wildlife, its persistence in the environment, how easily it moves into and through soil and its tendency to bioaccumulate in plant and animal tissue.

The NAP's target to reduce the impact of pesticides on the UK environment extends across all 20 metrics. It currently only applies to the agricultural arable sector, although this sector does account for around 90% of overall pesticide use in agriculture and horticulture.

Pesticide Use Surveys carried out on behalf of the Health and Safety Executive and published by Fera Science Ltd suggest an average 2,000 tonnes of glyphosate were applied to arable crops in the UK annually between 2020 and 2024 and across an average 2,600,000 hectares.

Based on figures published in Outlooks on Pest Management in 2018, pre-harvest use of glyphosate accounts for approximately 30% of the usage in wheat and barley and 59% in oilseed rape in the UK, suggesting an average 780,000 hectares treated annually for this purpose.



# Human health concerns

The use of glyphosate for pre-harvest desiccation significantly increases the risk of exposure through residues remaining in foodstuffs harvested and sold.

AHDB monitored contaminants in UK representative commercial samples of harvested and stored wheat, barley, oats and their co-products, used by milling, malting and animal feed industries covering harvests from 2016 to 2023. They found that while, in general, most cereals adhere to EU and UK laws and guidelines concerning the presence of the contaminants monitored, glyphosate was commonly detected with some variation (thought likely due to seasonal weather patterns). Of 1075 samples tested, 442 contained residues of glyphosate, a percentage of 41%. The residue range was 0.10-15 mg/kg.

AHDB also noted that milling wheat was generally associated with low incidence and levels, whereas barley had the highest incidence and oats had the highest levels, and that any glyphosate detected would have been due to pre-harvest use, rather than pre-emergence herbicide use.

Concerns from specialists across multiple disciplines have led to calls to lower Maximum Residue Limits permissible in biological material intended for food and feed, noting that *“human exposures to glyphosate-based herbicides are rising and that regulatory estimates of tolerable daily intakes for glyphosate in the United States and European Union are based on outdated science”*<sup>1</sup>.

There is ever-increasing evidence from animal studies and epidemiology of the harms to all body systems from exposure to glyphosate<sup>2</sup>. A ban on pre-harvest desiccant use of glyphosate would significantly reduce that exposure, by directly addressing residues in food.

The NAP does not currently include a quantified target to reduce or minimise pesticide impact on human health. Nevertheless, a ban on pre-harvest desiccation would represent a precautionary approach aligned with the NAP’s stated ambition to *“minimise impacts on... human health”*.

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## Environmental concerns

Glyphosate use has resulted in widespread environmental pollution of land and water courses with subsequent impacts on wild plant species, invertebrates, birds, amphibians, mammals, and fish<sup>3</sup>.

Wildlife is exposed to glyphosate through direct contact or through contaminated food or water<sup>4</sup>, including the ingestion of crops sprayed with glyphosate or non-target flowering plants<sup>5</sup>.

Glyphosate use also reduces the availability of food and habitat to wildlife by removing weeds, including wildflowers. Pre-harvest desiccation has a significantly deleterious impact on winter seed food that feeds birds through the winter and especially overwinter stubbles that provide important habitats for wintering birds.

A ban on the pre-harvest desiccant use of glyphosate would significantly reduce wildlife's exposure to glyphosate, including the bees, aquatic species, earthworms and plants that are indicator organisms in the National Action Plan's Pesticide Load Indicator.

## Integrated Pest Management

One of the NAP's objectives is to encourage the uptake of Integrated Pest Management, an ecosystem approach to crop production and protection that combines different management strategies and practices to grow healthy crops and minimise the use of conventional, chemical pesticides.

Farmers currently using glyphosate as a desiccant may need support to adopt alternatives to the practice while ensuring their businesses can continue to thrive. Government and the supply chain should incentivise integrated pest management and nature-friendly farming, investing in R&D for non-chemical desiccation methods, funding independent advice and science that help farmers implement new techniques and providing grants to transition.

## International obligations

The NAP also outlines how, at the 15th meeting of the Conference of Parties to the United Nations' Convention on Biological Diversity (COP 15) in December 2022, a global target was set to reduce *"the overall risk from pesticides and highly hazardous chemicals by at least half"* by 2030 as part of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. The target aims to *"reduce pollution to levels that are not harmful to biodiversity"*, noting that pollution from pesticides is among a number of sources that have *"particularly harmful impacts on biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services"*.

The government's Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP), published in December 2025, outlines the UK's commitments to the Global Biodiversity Framework, including Target 7 *"to reduce the risk from pesticides and highly hazardous chemicals by at least half, including through integrated pest management"*. According to the EIP, however, progress on this target remains *"mixed"*, and prospects *"largely off track"*. The UK's Seventh National Report to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity noted that *"considerable challenges remain"* in relation to progress towards Target 7, *"particularly in fully addressing... pesticide risk"*.

With an estimated around 780,000 hectares treated annually through pre-harvest use, a prohibition on the use of glyphosate as a pre-harvest desiccant could contribute significantly towards Target 7, although this would still need to be accompanied by pesticide reductions across all sectors to protect human health and biodiversity.



# Conclusion

This briefing outlines how the introduction of a prohibition on the use of glyphosate as a pre-harvest desiccant would underpin the agreement being developed towards a Common Sanitary and Phytosanitary Area with the European Union, as well as facilitating the UK moving swiftly towards meeting objectives outlined in the UK Pesticides National Action Plan to reduce the impact of pesticides on the UK environment by 10% by 2030. It would also help the UK to demonstrate meaningful progress towards its commitment to Target 7 of the United Nations' Convention on Biological Diversity's Global Biodiversity Framework's target to reduce the overall risk from pesticides by at least a half by 2030.

We urge the UK government to end the use of glyphosate as a pre-harvest desiccant and to provide the necessary support for farmers to adopt alternatives while ensuring their businesses can continue to thrive.



## References

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- 5 Zioga, E et al. (2022) Glyphosate used as desiccant contaminates plant pollen and nectar of non-target plant species in *Heliyon*. DOI: [10.1016/j.heliyon.2022.e12179](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2022.e12179)