BPA and glyphosate – A cautionary tale

BY STEVEN HENTGES, PH.D ON JULY 10, 2017 IN INDUSTRY

Although you may not recognize the name glyphosate, you probably do recognize the name Roundup. It's an effective and successful herbicide that contains glyphosate as its active ingredient. It's also been controversial due to claims that it can harm your health.

Glyphosate has been in the news lately after a questionable decision by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) to classify glyphosate as a probable carcinogen. As sure as night follows day, that led to a warning label requirement in the State of California and lawsuits *du jour* with numerous plaintiffs claiming to have been harmed.

On the surface, glyphosate has nothing to do with bisphenol A (BPA), which is a very different substance that is used primarily to make polycarbonate plastic and epoxy resins. But as outlined in an insightful article by Jenny Splitter on Vice.com, BPA tells a cautionary tale with important lessons for glyphosate.

For almost 20 years, BPA has also been controversial due to claims that it's an endocrine disruptor that can harm your health by interfering with normal endocrine functions in your body. There's never been a consensus that BPA causes any harm and government bodies worldwide, based on extensive scientific evidence, strongly support the safety of BPA. Here in the U.S, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) unambiguously answers the question "Is BPA safe?" with the straightforward answer "Yes."

Nevertheless, some product manufacturers succumbed to public pressure to eliminate BPA and switched to alternatives. As a way to avoid controversy, the old adage "better safe than sorry" seems to have a lot to offer. What's not to like about a BPA-free product?

But, as noted by Splitter, "[t]oday, there's plenty of BPA-free plastic on the market, but consumers aren't any safer for it." The reason is that product manufacturers didn't replace BPA with nothing, they had to replace it with something else.

What's now becoming apparent is that alternatives to BPA may not be so well studied and don't have the same safety track record that BPA has enjoyed for decades. Maybe Aesop had it right after all. It might be a better idea to "look before you leap" to avoid regrettable substitutions.

The lesson for glyphosate is clear, or at least it should be clear for those who wish to get rid of it. Would a glyphosate-free future really be better? Just as with BPA, glyphosate would not be replaced with nothing since weeds must still be controlled.

Without glyphosate, farmers would likely use another herbicide but not necessarily one that's safer or less toxic. Again as noted by Splitter, "if farmers stopped using glyphosate, would our food be any safer? Not likely."

Perhaps the most important lesson from BPA and glyphosate is that our desire and need for science-based regulations may necessarily entail a slow scientific process. In her closing comments, Splitter correctly observes that "when we sidestep that challenging process and opt for an industry-driven solution, the result isn't better for consumers. What we get is something that is designed to make consumers feel better, not satisfy the rigorous requirements of science." Her tale at Vice.com is well worth hearing.

To find out more about bisphenol A, visit FactsAboutBPA.org.