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EU health chief appeals for ban of cancer-causing pesticides

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The European Union's top health official appealed to EU governments on Monday to adopt stringent new rules to ban the use of all potentially cancer-causing pesticides.

EU Health Commissioner Androulla Vassiliou told EU agriculture ministers they should not water down two-year old draft plans to introduce tougher guidelines on the use of pesticides, including mandatory record-keeping of their use by farmers.

"The key aim of the proposal is to protect the health of citizens and the environment, we must not lose sight of this," Vassiliou told the ministers.

She said parts of the plan, which include a ban on pesticides that can cause cancer, are toxic to reproductive systems and those that disrupt hormones, should no longer be used to spray crops because of the danger they pose to human and animal health and the environment.

"They cannot be authorized," she said. "We must all ensure that we give our citizens a clear message that these proposals aim at high public safety."

The plan, which needs approval by EU governments and the European Parliament, also seeks to tighten and simplify the rules for authorizing new pesticides that come on to the EU market.

It also aims to force pesticide makers to reduce animal testing of their products, calls for the banning of pesticides in specific sensitive areas near nature reserves or parks and restricts the use of crop-dusters.

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Negotiations however, have been bogged down and Ireland, Hungary, and France remain opposed to the EU-wide measures fearing they either go too far or don't go far enough.

The chemicals industry has been lobbying governments and EU lawmakers too arguing that imposing the new rules could reduce farm yields at a time of global food shortages and high commodity prices and reduce the competitiveness of Europe's high tech sector.

Germany and others have said that existing limits on the use of pesticides were sufficient but German Agriculture Minister Horst Seehofer said he would be open to a ban if it would lead to a compromise deal.

Vassiliou said the measures had to include incentives by which safer alternatives could be used by farmers, for a reasonable price.

The European Commission says new rules are overdue to replace outdated regulations on pesticides and spur research into alternative methods.

It says continued pesticide use damages water, air and soil and could cause long-term health problems for humans, animals and plants.

The Commission said the latest figures show some 300,000 tons of pesticide substances were sold in Europe in 2003 with no sign of a decrease in use over the past decade.

The EU head office said the contamination of rivers, streams and waterbeds used as sources of drinking water was an acute problem in Europe.

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