

The following article prepared by Bruce Knight featured in the May 2018 issue of Crop Protection Monthly

SWISS CITIZENS CALL FOR SYNTHETIC PESTICIDE BAN

More than 100,000 Swiss citizens have signed a petition calling for a ban on the use of synthetic pesticides by Swiss farmers and industries and on imported foods. The numbers are considered sufficient to force government to authorise a referendum. The use of referendums to bring about changes in laws, are relatively commonplace in Switzerland. The move was initiated by a citizen's group called Future3 (www.future3.ch/en). The petition has come about following the controversy in Europe over the recent re-approval of glyphosate and the near total ban of neonicotinoids. If the vote is passed, Switzerland would become only the second country after Bhutan to implement a full ban. A ban in Switzerland would be of much greater global significance, particularly with the presence of Syngenta in Basle. Antoinette Gilson, representing Future3 said: "To not use any pesticides will trigger a complete change in agricultural practices...It might be difficult to go through, but in Switzerland around 13% of farmers are already organic. I talk to a lot of them and I have not met one who has regretted giving up pesticides."

The formal petition is due to be presented to the Federal Chancellery in Bern in late May. However, it could be another three years before a national referendum is launched. The details of the signatures have to be checked and transferred to the Federal Council. They have one year to give their recommendations to parliament. The legislators then have two further years to accept the initiative and schedule a vote, or to come up with a counter initiative that could also feature on the ballot. If passed, all synthetic pesticides would be phased out over a period of 10 years. The rules would also apply to imports which could have significant impacts on neighbouring agricultural countries as Switzerland imports, on average, almost 500kg of food per head of population, according to figures from the Federal Customs Administration.

The idea of a referendum has been dismissed by farmers and industry representatives, who argue that it is too extreme and will not gain popular support. Anna Bozzi from Science Industries Switzerland said in a statement: "The initiative is too radical and overshoots the goal...Plant protection products are indispensable to ward off diseases and pests. A general ban would affect tremendously the yields as well as the quality of the agricultural products in Switzerland. The import ban would thwart supply and drive up prices." Professor Edward Mitchell from the University of Neuchâtel, a member of the Future3 committee, said: "I am convinced that other countries may follow suit...Switzerland with its direct democracy system is somewhat different from other countries, making such a change perhaps more likely in the short term. This puts us in a privileged position to act proactively rather than in response to government actions, and with this goes a responsibility to do so."