

Glyphosate-cancer lawsuits spur farmers to embrace 'precision farming' to help reduce chemical inputs

American juries are well known for the generosity of their awards in civil cases So Bayer, a German chemicals giant, told shareholders not to worry when a Californian jury in August ruled that Monsanto, an American firm it bought two months before, had to pay \$289m to Dewayne Johnson, a former school caretaker. Mr Johnson alleged that Roundup, a glyphosate-based weedkiller, had caused his terminal cancer. The jury made a judgment based on "junk science", Monsanto said. It would surely be overturned on appeal.

Last month a judge reaffirmed the verdict; the damages were trimmed, but to a still-hefty \$78.5m. With Bayer's admission on November 13th that the number of similar lawsuits had reached 9,300, it is clear that the bill for compensation could reach tens of billions of dollars.

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Farmers in turn are switching to "precision" methods, entailing more targeted use of chemicals or robots to do weeding. Bayer executives fear this shift could hit demand for its pesticides by as much as 20-30% over the next decade

Precision farming "will change how we think about farming," says Sam Watson Jones of the Small Robot Company It is developing three small autonomous robots—called Tom, Dick and Harry—which will only feed and spray the specific plants that need it rather than dusting an entire field He claims that his company's system will cut chemical use, and carbon emissions, by up to 95%.

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