

Dying groundskeeper battles chemical giant Monsanto

August 8 2018, by Julie Charpentrat, Glenn Chapman



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Cancer-stricken Dewayne Johnson vowed to fight to his death in a David

versus Goliath court battle against agrochemical giant Monsanto, whose weed killer he blames for robbing him of his future.

"I will fight until my last breath," Johnson, a 46-year-old former school groundskeeper, said while testifying at a potentially history-making civil trial.

Jurors began deliberating on Wednesday after a month of hearing testimony in a San Francisco, California state court.

Despite terminal cancer and bouts of chemotherapy, Johnson—known to friends as "Lee"—managed to smile at times as he told jurors of his life and his struggle to hold Monsanto accountable.

He moved and spoke slowly, appearing older than his years, but his voice was strong while testifying during the last week of July.

His bearing defied the fact he has been told he has only a couple more years to live.

"It's very hard," said Johnson, his head shaved but a slight goatee on his face.

"Pesticide professional"

Photos shared in court showed Johnson with lesions over much of his body. Jurors were told of his open sores, some even on Johnson's eyelid causing pain every time he blinked.

"I've been through a lot of pain," Johnson testified.

He told of people staring at him in public, and of avoiding sunlight due to his skin being too sensitive.

Johnson looked strong despite his ordeal. He walked carefully in and out of court, politely holding the door for others at times and softly exchanging pleasantries.

The father of two boys, ages 10 and 13, spoke of enjoying writing and making music before he was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma in 2014.

The incurable cancer affects [white blood cells](#).

After being promoted in 2012 to groundskeeper in a Benicia, California school district, Johnson's job came to include spraying Roundup, and more often a professional version from Monsanto called RangerPro.

The active ingredient in both products is glyphosate, which has been at the center of a debate regarding whether it poses a cancer risk.

Monsanto, recently acquired by Germany-based Bayer in a deal valued at about \$62 billion, has held firm that there's no link between the [weed killer](#) and cancer—especially not the kind suffered by Johnson.

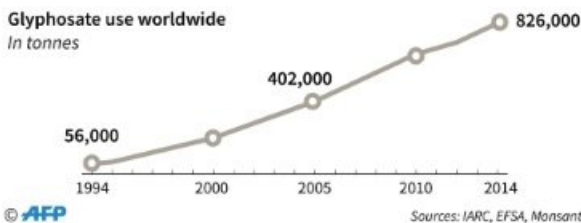
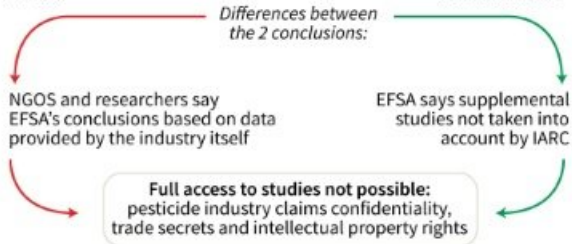
Johnson's job included vanquishing rodents, weeds or other non-human schoolyard pests in Benicia, a small city near San Francisco.

Glyphosate, a powerful and controversial weedkiller

Classed as:

probably carcinogenic
by the International Agency
for Research on Cancer (IARC)
in 2015

unlikely to cause cancer
by the European Food Safety
Authority (EFSA)
in 2015 and 2017



Chemical structure: $C_3H_8NO_5P$

Main agent in Roundup herbicide produced by Monsanto, now owned by Bayer

Produced by other companies since 2000 (public patent)

An indiscriminate herbicide that kills most plants

- 1 An additive binds the herbicide to the plant's surface, so it is more easily absorbed
- 2 Glyphosate inhibits the EPSPS enzyme found in plants and some micro-organisms
- 3 The plant dies because it can no longer produce certain amino acids

Some seeds (corn, soya) have been **genetically modified** to tolerate glyphosate

Some plants have become **resistant**

Toxic for aquatic organisms

Glyphosate decomposes

Factfile on the controversial herbicide glyphosate as a US jury to begin deliberations Wednesday in compensation case against chemical giant Monsanto, now owned by Bayer.

He underwent training as a "pesticide professional" to safely handle chemicals used to do the job, according to testimony in court.

"I liked my job a lot," Johnson testified.

"I took my job very seriously."

He proudly explained that he learned most of his work skills on the job, prompting smiles in the courtroom as he told of doing away with "30 skunks; 25 raccoons, and one squirrel."

Johnson also killed weeds, and for that he was armed with Roundup or

RangerPro. As per instructions, he diluted the solutions with water before spraying.

He was adamant that had he known the chemicals might cause cancer, he "would never have sprayed" it anywhere.

Johnson decided to file a lawsuit against Monsanto two years ago, backed by lawyers from the Miller Firm, which specializes in these kinds of cases.

Johnson said he had no idea about the controversy around glyphosate until rashes set his skin fiercely itching and he took to the internet in search of answers.

"Not getting better"

Johnson said he took meticulous care at work, following product label instructions and wearing protective gear while spraying weed-killer. There is nothing on Roundup or RangerPro labels warning of a [cancer risk](#), something that the lawsuit charges was so negligent it amounted to Monsanto putting profit over people's health.

Johnson twice was drenched with RangerPro when spraying gear malfunctioned. Attorney Brent Wisner argued in court that chemicals in the mix enabled glyphosate to penetrate Johnson's protective suit and soak his skin, causing or exacerbating the cancer.

Johnson said he "panicked" after getting soaked the second time with RangerPro and a rash broke out on his skin.

"I was in denial until this case," Johnson said. "But, now it's pretty scary. I am not getting better."

Johnson's wife, Araceli, testified that her husband's job meant everything to him, and that he was "sexy" and happy before his illness.

The couple took walks, went out to dinner. Johnson kept the house organized. But now, all that has changed.

Johnson is no longer able to work. To support the family and pay medical bills, his wife works two jobs—one in a school and another in a retirement home.

Johnson told of cancer treatments so painful they made him weep.

Jurors are being asked not only to side with Johnson against Monsanto, they have been urged by his attorney to award him more than \$400 million in a verdict that would punish the giant.

The case is the first alleging a [cancer](#) link from Roundup, one of the world's most widely used herbicides, to reach trial. A Monsanto loss could open the floodgates for hundreds more similar cases in the pipeline.

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