

The Passionate Eye · New documentary

## He was drenched in a weed-killer made by Monsanto in a workplace accident. Then he was diagnosed with cancer

New documentary follows former groundskeeper Dewayne “Lee” Johnson’s trial against agrochemical giant Monsanto

[Vanessa Caldwell](#) · CBC Docs · Posted: Sep 15, 2022 9:00 AM ET | Last Updated: September 15



The documentary *Into the Weeds: Dewayne “Lee” Johnson vs. Monsanto Company* follows Johnson’s fight for justice against the agrochemical giant while examining how Roundup is used around the world — and the potential repercussions of its use. (Photo courtesy of Disappearing Insects Productions Inc.)

In 2015, the International Agency for Research on Cancer, a branch of the World Health Organization, classified glyphosate — the active ingredient in weed-killer Roundup — as "probably carcinogenic to humans."

A year later, Dewayne "Lee" Johnson, a former groundskeeper from California, filed a lawsuit against Monsanto. He claimed that Ranger Pro, another of the company's glyphosate-based herbicides, was a substantial contributing factor in causing his non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

Johnson's was the bellwether trial — a test case — in a mass tort against Monsanto (now owned by Bayer AG). It involves tens of thousands of plaintiffs: people who had used Roundup or Ranger Pro and were later diagnosed with cancer. Bayer maintains that glyphosate is safe to use.

The documentary [\*Into the Weeds: Dewayne "Lee" Johnson vs. Monsanto Company\*](#) follows Johnson's fight for justice against the agrochemical giant while examining how Roundup is used around the world — and the potential repercussions of its use.

## 'That job saved me from the bottom'

Before Johnson was hired as a groundskeeper for the Benicia Unified School District in California, he, his wife, Araceli, and their children had been living with his mother.

"[The] boys used to sleep on the couch ... Araceli got up, worked her two jobs, and I did whatever I could, when I could, you know. We had the two boys. It was tough. It was tight in here. We got through it, though," Johnson says in the film. "That job saved me from the bottom."

- ['I want to go to trial. I want them to see what they're doing to people'](#)

"He'd been unemployed for so long," says Johnson's mother, DeLois Harvey. "And when he got that job, he was just ecstatic."

At work, Johnson used Ranger Pro to spray facilities throughout the district: fields, fence lines, hillsides. During his trial, he said he received some safety training on the product but was unaware of any risks. "The main thing that sticks out to me that I remember is that she told us it was safe enough to drink," he recalled.



In this photo from *Into the Weeds*, Johnson wears a protective face mask and Tyvek suit. (Photo courtesy of Disappearing Insects Productions Inc. )

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Johnson would carry the herbicide in a tank on the back of his truck. In the summer of 2013, the hose got caught in a crack in the road and snapped off.

"It [was] a fountain of Ranger Pro coming out of the back of my little pickup truck," Johnson says in the film.

"I had my Tyvek suit on, but of course this thing is showering me," he says. "I got it all over me, down in my suit, in my gloves, everywhere. And I went back to the shop, changed my shirt — I left the pants on, I didn't have any other trousers — and I cleaned up and I went back to work."

At the end of his second spraying season, Johnson discovered a lesion on his knee. He wasn't sure what it was, but it spread and spread. By October 2014, it was covering his whole body. That's when he found out he had non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

## **The unreturned phone call**

After Johnson's diagnosis, he wondered if his cancer could be related to such a large exposure to Ranger Pro. He called Monsanto.

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**From:** BIEHL, PATRICIA M  
**Sent:** Tuesday, November 11, 2014  
**To:** GOLDSTEIN, DANIEL A  
**Subject:** Ranger Pro Exposure

Spoke with Dewayne Johnson @ [REDACTED] and this is his story.

He told me he works for a school district in CA and about 9 months ago had a hose break on a large tank sprayer. This resulted in him becoming soaked to the skin on his face, neck and head with Ranger Pro. He said he was wearing a white exposure suit and it even went inside that. A few months after this incident he noticed a rash on his knee then on his face and later on the side of his head. He said he changed his laundry detergent, dryer sheets and used all creams available to him but nothing seemed to help. His entire body is covered in this now and doctors are saying it is skin cancer.

He is just trying to find out if it could all be related to such a large exposure to Ranger Pro since he stated his skin was always perfect until this happened. He is looking for answers.

Thanks in advance for your assistance.

*Patricia Biehl*  
Product Support Specialist

After his diagnosis, Johnson wondered if his cancer could be related to such a large exposure to Ranger Pro, so he called Monsanto. This email appears in *Into the Weeds*. (Photo courtesy of Disappearing Insects Productions Inc. )

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In Johnson's trial, his lawyer Brent Wisner refers to an internal document from Monsanto about that conversation. It reads, "Spoke to Dewayne Johnson, and this is his story."

Dr. Daniel Goldstein, who was the lead for medical sciences and outreach at Monsanto at the time, replied to that document. "I will call him," he said.

"No one called [Johnson] back. Dr. Goldstein never reached out to him. And so he just keeps using [Ranger Pro]. And it gets worse and worse and worse," said Wisner.





## After he was diagnosed with cancer, Lee Johnson called Monsanto looking for answers | Into the Weeds

4 days ago | 0:25

Johnson wanted to know if working with RoundUp could have caused his cancer. Monsanto has a record of his call, but no one called him back.

## 'Before this illness, I had pretty much flawless skin'

Johnson got sicker and sicker. "Before this illness, I had pretty much flawless skin. Always clean, always fresh outfits, stuff like that," he says. "I was the pretty boy all the time trying to be fresh for the ladies, you know? So that's something of the past."

Eventually, he had to tell his young sons what was happening.

"My boys, they saw the effects, they saw the markings, they saw me limping around ... so I had to go ahead and tell them, so they'd know from me what was going on," he says. "I told them that I had, you know, cancer."



## Before cancer, Lee Johnson had 'pretty much flawless skin' | Into the Weeds

4 days ago | 0:49



Johnson developed terminal Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma in 2014. Before his diagnosis, he took pride in his appearance. "That's something of the past."

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In *Into the Weeds*, Araceli Johnson worries about her family's future. "How're they gonna feel when Dad is not here?" she says. "And I do worry, 'Do I have enough time to explore the world with him? How many birthdays he's going to be here with the kids? Is he going to be here for graduation?'"

## 'He truly believed it was safe'

Despite Monsanto's claim that glyphosate was not carcinogenic, Johnson believed his exposure to Ranger Pro was a substantial factor in developing his cancer. He decided to sue Monsanto.

In his opening arguments at the trial, Wisner said, "Instead of just warning and telling consumers, 'Hey, these studies show this stuff can cause cancer,' Monsanto has refused. They have fought science. And you will see evidence that shows that Monsanto has specifically gone out of its way to bully scientists and to fight independent researchers who are finding conclusions outside of the Monsanto corporate umbrella. And the consequences of that conduct are why we're here today. Because of what Monsanto has done, Mr. Johnson was not given a choice ... He truly believed it was safe."



Attorney Brent Wisner presents his closing argument in Johnson v. Monsanto Company. (Photo courtesy of Courtroom View Network and Disappearing Insects Productions Inc. © 2022)

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The verdict in Johnson's case would set a precedent for tens of thousands of other people who had also filed cases against Monsanto.

"I remember the night before the verdict," Johnson says in the film. "I got really concerned, like, if I lose, these people won't ever get a chance to even tell their story."

The jury deliberated for three days. They found, unanimously, that Monsanto had failed to warn Johnson and other consumers of the cancer risks posed by its glyphosate-based products.

Johnson was awarded \$298 million US in damages (which was later cut back to \$20.5 million on appeal).

## 'I want the label to be changed'

"One of the things that people ask me [is] what is it that I want," says Johnson. "And I want the label to be changed."

"I would say 80 per cent of our clients say, 'I just want the public to know so nobody ends up using this product without knowing that it can cause illness, and that if they're going to use it still, they should protect themselves,'" says Robin Greenwald, a lawyer who served as co-lead counsel in the Roundup multidistrict litigation in San Francisco.

By the end of 2021, Bayer had allocated approximately \$16 billion US to Roundup litigation in the United States, addressing roughly 98,000 of 125,000 cases. As of February 2022, 28 Canadian lawsuits relating to Roundup have been served upon Bayer.

[\*\*\*Watch Into the Weeds: Dewayne "Lee" Johnson vs. Monsanto Company on CBC and CBC Gem.\*\*\*](#)



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