

US\$2 BILLION LAWSUIT gives impetus to calls to ban glyphosate

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Anti-glyphosate campaigners' efforts to have the use of the product banned across Africa have been boosted by the US\$2,055 billion (approximately R29,5 billion) awarded in punitive and compensatory damages by the San Francisco Superior Court to a couple in the US.

Alva and Alberta Pilliod reportedly contracted non-Hodgkin lymphoma following years of exposure to the glyphosate-based herbicide, Roundup.

The latest judgment against Bayer, which now owns glyphosate's original developer and marketer Monsanto, was the largest in favour of plaintiffs following two other successful lawsuits in that country.

Mariam Mayet, executive director of the African Centre for Biodiversity, said the organisation had long been concerned about glyphosate's impact on human and environmental health through its widespread application to food and fibre crops. "The outcomes of these court cases cannot be ignored. If US courts are satisfied with the causation between non-Hodgkin lymphoma and exposure to glyphosate, we cannot stand by and do nothing. We are now going to approach the South African government and all other African governments to ban glyphosate," Mayet said.

Vanessa Black, the advocacy, research and policy coordinator at Biowatch South Africa, said the rulings in these lawsuits showed that it was "for good reason" that civil society organisations in South Africa had been calling for a review of agrochemicals licensed in South Africa for many years.

"Biowatch is especially worried about South Africa's shockingly ubiquitous use of glyphosate," she said.

Responding to the judgment, Dr Bongani Maseko, general manager of agri-biotech at AfricaBio, said that while AfricaBio expressed "sincere sympathy" for the Pilliods' and other victims' battle with cancer, the safety of glyphosate was supported by numerous scientific studies and proven in scientific literature, where the consensus is that glyphosate does not cause cancer.

"South African regulators continue to monitor international developments regarding the use of glyphosate. No regulatory authority in the world currently considers glyphosate to be a cancer risk to humans," Maseko said.

Bloomberg reported that recent Roundup court losses prompted shareholders to turn against Bayer CEO Werner Baumann. At a shareholders' meeting held in Germany in April, about 55% of shareholders voted against absolving Baumann and other managers of responsibility for their actions in Bayer's takeover of Monsanto. Since completion of the US\$63 billion (R909 billion) acquisition in June, litigation concerns have eroded Bayer's value by more than 40%. – Lloyd Phillips