

The Federal Cancer Gag Act: Pesticides Over People

Corporate agriculture is taking a huge toll on public health in America, and the corporate giants behind the system are paying big money to cover it up. A foolhardy reliance on dangerous pesticides underpins much of this system. Chemicals like glyphosate and paraquat are linked to a host of health impacts, and the largest manufacturers are doing all they can to obscure that fact. Led by agrichemical giant and pesticide manufacturer Bayer, this industry seeks to rob sick Americans of their ability to sue on the basis that a company failed to warn them of its product's risks. But people are seeing through this deception, defeating state pesticide immunity legislation across the agricultural heartland from lowa to Montana. In 2025, most of these bills failed to pass across the country. Now, the industry is running scared, spending millions of dollars as it moves the fight to Congress.

Pesticide Proliferation

The U.S. is a nation drowning in pesticides, with over 800 pesticides registered and more than 1 billion pounds sprayed annually.⁴ "Pesticide" is an umbrella term used to describe chemicals that kill or repel pests, encompassing herbicides, insecticides, and fungicides.⁵ Use of these chemicals has exploded in the last few decades: between 1974 and 2014, annual U.S. agricultural use of glyphosate alone rose 300-fold.⁶

Monsanto introduced its glyphosate-based herbicide Roundup in 1974, and in the mid-1990s, the company released soybean, cotton, and corn seeds resistant to its Roundup product. These resistant varieties now make up the majority of U.S. corn, soybean, and cotton crops. With these developments, glyphosate could now be applied up to three times after crop emergence to kill pests without impacting crop yields, and total U.S. acreage sprayed by glyphosate exploded ninefold. Bayer acquired Monsanto in 2018, eliminating the Monsanto branding and bringing Roundup and other former Monsanto products into its portfolio.

Today in the U.S., herbicides cover 96 percent of corn and soybean acreage, equating to 160 million acres of land. Olyphosate-based herbicides are the most widely used herbicides in the country, applied to nearly 300 million acres of agricultural land annually. Field crops like soybeans, corn, and cotton receive the most by weight, accounting for 83 percent of the 281 million pounds applied.

Repeated applications of glyphosate on cropland, season after season, helped facilitate the development of "superweeds" that are resistant to the herbicide. As of July 2025, as many as 60 weed species around the world were identified as resistant to glyphosate. The corporate solution to pesticide overuse has historically been to peddle even more volumes and varieties of pesticides.

Today, the majority of U.S. soybean seeds are now also resistant to dicamba — another herbicide ingredient produced by Bayer — as well as 2,4-D, and reliance on these rose 10-fold since 2010, with applications to soybeans jumping the most compared to other crops. ¹⁵ Between soybean and corn combined, U.S. farmers apply around 41.3 million pounds of 2,4-D and 15.8 million pounds of dicamba every year. ¹⁶

Cancerous Consequences

In 2023, lawmakers in Congress introduced the Agricultural Labeling Uniformity Act (HR 4288), which opponents quickly nicknamed the "Cancer Gag Act." The bill — expected to be reintroduced in 2025 — would shield pesticide corporations from many health-related lawsuits for failure to warn of risks by restricting the authority of state and local governments to label pesticides. The bill would prevent farmers, workers, and ordinary citizens from exercising their right to seek justice and to hold pesticide companies accountable for their failure to put them on notice of risks of health impacts related to exposure, including cancer.¹⁷

With such a toxic bill, multiple attempts have been made to sneak the labeling provisions into larger pieces of legislation like the Farm Bill and even the unrelated annual Pentagon spending bill. State legislatures introduced 12 copycat bills in the 2025 state legislative sessions, where the vast majority failed to pass. These state and federal Cancer Gag Act bills surfaced at the same time that Bayer faces 67,000 outstanding lawsuits alleging that Roundup caused cancer.

As pesticide manufacturers push these bills to protect their profit, the U.S. is suffering from a cancer crisis. Over 2 million Americans will receive a cancer diagnosis in 2025, joining the more than 18 million already living with the disease. ²¹ The state Cancer Gag Act bills have overwhelmingly targeted the most cancer-vulnerable states. All but one of the 12 states where iterations of the bills ran in 2025 are above the national average for cancer incidence. ²² Iowa — one of the major battleground states for this legislation, with Bayer pouring over \$200,000 into the state since the 2024 reporting cycle — is one of only two U.S. states with rising cancer rates. ²³

An abundance of evidence suggests that pesticide exposure can cause cancer. In 2015, the World Health Organization's International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) classified glyphosate as "probably carcinogenic," indicating strong data on the chemical's cancer-causing properties.²⁴ Multiple studies included in this decision linked glyphosate exposure with increased risk for non-Hodgkin lymphoma (NHL), and a more recent meta-analysis found that high exposure to glyphosate-based herbicides results in a 41 percent increased risk of NHL.²⁵ Glyphosate has also been linked to endocrine disruption, reproductive problems, birth defects, and developmental disorders in children.²⁶

A growing body of research associates exposure to other pesticides with a host of health hazards, including cancer. The Cancer Gag Act would prevent individuals harmed by *any* type of pesticide from suing over inadequate warning of the risks.²⁷ Dicamba exposure, for example, is associated with several types of cancers, including lung, colon, liver, and prostate.²⁸ Many pesticides are linked to thyroid disruption, which contributes to risk of thyroid cancer.²⁹ Cancer is not the only side effect — individuals with paraquat exposure are 1.25 times at risk for Parkinson's disease.³⁰ Studies further show other non-cancer effects of pesticide exposure, including Alzheimer's disease,



reproductive disorders, and respiratory problems. Pesticides may also damage DNA and contribute to organ failure.³¹

Pesticide exposure largely impacts agricultural workers, farmers, and their families.³² The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimates that farmworker pesticide exposure results in as many as 300,000 acute illnesses per year, and these illnesses likely follow industry-wide trends where Latino or Hispanic farmers are most impacted.³³ In the Midwest, where agricultural pesticide use is most concentrated, research attributed an additional 155,000 cancer cases per year to pesticide exposure when compared to low-use regions.³⁴ Exposure is also not distributed evenly — in California, over half of the state's glyphosate use occurs in the eight most impoverished counties.³⁵ Children in particular are vulnerable to pesticide exposure when their school or home is located near agricultural applications, with children of color the most at-risk population.³⁶

However, it is not only farmers that face exposure to carcinogenic pesticides. Bayer claims that 90 percent of the Roundup lawsuits levied against the company come from persons exposed to the pesticide during residential use.³⁷ As of 2012, home and garden expenditures accounted for a quarter of the pesticide market, opening up a major route of exposure for non-farmers.³⁸ Non-agricultural use of glyphosate specifically made up 10 percent of the market in 2014.³⁹ Consumer applicators often receive no training for safe application, leaving them at higher risk.⁴⁰ This may add to the pesticide load that Americans already face, with over 90 percent of the population having detectable pesticide biomarkers in their blood or urine.⁴¹

In 2023, Bayer purportedly removed glyphosate from residential use products in an effort to mitigate future litigation.⁴² For those who used the pesticide prior to pulling it off the market, however, this may be too little, too late. The latency period for developing NHL after exposure can be up to 30 years or more,⁴³ meaning that even if someone stopped use in 2023, they could potentially develop cancer as late as the 2050s. By the time this individual even received a diagnosis, a successful national or state Cancer Gag Act could make it far too late to hold pesticide companies accountable or to recoup any damages for their failure to provide warning of the risks of exposure.

Limiting Liability

The EPA does not require pesticide products to display warning labels detailing long-term health risks. Instead, EPA labels focus solely on acute risks from accidental ingestion and make no mention of long-term effects like cancer.⁴⁴ Bayer and its industry lap dogs aim to block lawsuits so long as product warning labels meet current EPA guidelines.⁴⁵ This quest for limited corporate liability is at the center of the Cancer Gag Act.

Notably, the EPA cannot always be relied on to help consumers make safe choices. Lee Zeldin, the new EPA administrator appointed by President Trump, has vowed to pursue a deregulation agenda that capitulates to industry at the expense of public health.⁴⁶ The EPA has already long lagged its counterparts in other countries in regulating dangerous pesticides.⁴⁷ In examining occupational hazards, the EPA employs a cost-benefit analysis that favors the corporate grower over the farmworker.⁴⁸ The pesticide registration process shuns the safer "precautionary principle" that governs places like the European Union (EU), which strives to do as little harm as possible, rather than ask how much harm is allowable.⁴⁹ The EPA is also reluctant to unilaterally revoke pesticide



approvals, instead relying on companies to voluntarily stop selling products.⁵⁰ In 2016, the U.S. routinely sprayed 322 million pounds of 72 pesticides that have been banned in the EU.⁵¹

The EPA's pesticide registration process is also vulnerable to outside influence. In the 2010s, Monsanto pressured the EPA to kill a glyphosate review that was to be undertaken by the U.S. Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, and to suspend an EPA Scientific Advisory Panel on the health risks of glyphosate. Monsanto also ghostwrote "independent" scientific papers supporting the safety of glyphosate, including one that made it into the EPA's 2017 glyphosate cancer assessment. Sa

Without the EPA fully considering harms in advance, injured parties must rely on litigation to force liability onto manufacturers and to receive compensation for damages retroactively.⁵⁴ The IARC decision led to thousands of lawsuits across the U.S., with consumers arguing that they developed NHL from exposure to Roundup.⁵⁵ In 2020, Bayer paid out over \$10 billion to settle 95,000 Roundup lawsuits in one of the largest settlements ever.⁵⁶ Despite this, the company maintains that Roundup is safe to use, and Bayer now seeks to quietly stifle future litigation at the federal and state levels via the Cancer Gag Acts.⁵⁷

Bayer Spends Big to Protect Profits

As a result of these lawsuits, Bayer is now waging a war on all fronts to protect profits and scapegoat the public for its own poor business decision to acquire Monsanto. Since the 2018 acquisition, Bayer's net income has plummeted 250 percent, with the company operating at a net loss in 2023 and 2024. In its Crop Sciences division, which houses Roundup and other pesticides, earnings have plummeted 187 percent since 2018.⁵⁸ At the end of 2024, Bayer set aside \$5.9 billion for glyphosate litigation, and in April 2025, Bayer approved a plan to dilute shares to raise an additional \$9 billion for future litigation.⁵⁹ Bayer's CEO has publicly stated that the company takes billions in annual losses due to the sheer volume of litigation.⁶⁰

As the company flounders, Bayer is spending big to boost this dangerous legislation at the highest level, lobbying entities like the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate, the EPA, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.⁶¹ Food & Water Watch (FWW) found that between 2023 and the second quarter of 2025, Bayer spent up to \$21.3 million on lobbying efforts at the federal level, including on the Agricultural Labeling Uniformity Act and the Farm Bill.⁶² This represents a 43 percent increase in spending from total spending in the prior ten quarters.⁶³ This money has gone a long way, even giving the company influence over the exact bill text. Bill authors solicited the input of Bayer lobbyists on the Agricultural Labeling Uniformity Act, and the lobbyists helped to shop the bill around Congress.⁶⁴

At the same time, Bayer is spending big on lobbying in states with Cancer Gag Act legislation. In lowa, Bayer registered seven lobbyists and spent \$209,750 in the 2024 and 2025 reporting cycles — a 400 percent increase compared to the money spent during the two previous cycles. FWW analysis found that a Bayer-aligned industry group, the Modern Ag Alliance, spent more than \$250,000 between January 2024 and March 2025 to flood lowa's radio airways with over 3,300 ad spots promoting glyphosate, and paid its lobbyist \$10,000 in the 2025 reporting period. In Florida, Bayer spent \$100,000 on lobbyists from 2024 through June 2025.



In Missouri, where most of the glyphosate lawsuits against Bayer are based, the company has registered nine lobbyists, and the *Missouri Independent* found that the Modern Ag Alliance spent over \$180,000 on advertisements promoting glyphosate between November 2024 and March 2025.⁶⁸ Court documents show that Bayer is also ghostwriting letters to the editor about glyphosate's safety and publishing these under the signatures of non-author Missouri legislators.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, the bills failed in all three of these states in 2025.⁷⁰

While Bayer does not make candidate contributions as a company, the Bayer PAC allows for employees to funnel money to political candidates. From January 2023 through June 2025, the PAC and its Missouri state affiliate gave over \$700,000 to political candidates, with more than a quarter of that occurring in the first half of 2025. Nearly \$70,000 of this went to sponsors or co-sponsors of the Agricultural Labeling Uniformity Act, with these individuals receiving more in the first half of 2025 than in all of 2024. Over one third of the money went to state or federal candidates in states where a version of the Cancer Gag Act was introduced in 2025, totaling over \$250,000. Missouri and lowa candidates saw the most contributions among these states, with \$67,760 and \$56,000, respectively.⁷¹

Conclusion

Even as pesticide giants desperately funnel money into pushing their agenda, people power is beating the odds. In February 2025, FWW rallied 150 lowans at the state capitol to protest in opposition to lowa's Cancer Gag Act.⁷² Just a few weeks later, the House Speaker declared the bill dead from lack of support, even among Republicans.⁷³ This pattern is being replicated across the country, with bills dying in 9 of the 12 states with Cancer Gag Acts introduced during the 2025 session.⁷⁴

People across the United States — including those in the agricultural heartland — oppose shielding pesticide corporations from liability. A federal Cancer Gag Act would preempt state labeling requirements and disempower states from doing what is best for their residents. To stop Bayer and its Big Ag cronies, legislators must oppose the Cancer Gag Act and any effort to limit state, county, and local authority to label and regulate pesticides.

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