Eyes in the Field: How Smart Sensors Are Helping Farmers Fight Weeds Without Wasting Money on Chemicals

Swagat Kumar Bhoi[1]*, Sandeep Manuja[1], Gurudev Singh[1], Meenakshi[1] and Vinayak Kumar Singh[1]

[1]*Department of Agronomy, Chaudhary Sarwan Kumar Himachal Pradesh Krishi Vishva Vidyalaya, Palampur 176062, Himachal Pradesh, India.*

Corresponding Author
Swagat Kumar Bhoi
Email: swagatkumarbhoi15@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Weeds are one of the worst things that can happen to a farm. Every year, they steal water, nutrients, and sunlight from crops, which costs farmers around the world a lot of money. The old answer was easy: spray the whole field with chemicals that kill weeds and hope for the best. But this method costs a lot of money, pollutes the soil, and makes weeds stronger and harder to kill over time. Weed management based on sensors is a better way to do things today. Sensors, which are special electronic "eyes," are put on tractors, drones, or robots. These sensors look over the field, find the exact spots where the weeds are growing, and then spray only those spots. The rest of the field is not touched. This means that farmers will use a lot fewer chemicals, which will save them money and make the world a cleaner place for everyone.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine a farmer standing at the edge of a field in the morning. There are healthy crops and clean, green areas in some parts of the field. But there are some places where weeds have grown, which is bad because they eat the crop's food and water. The old way to

deal with this was to spray the whole field with herbicides, which are chemicals that kill weeds. The whole field gets wet, even if 70% of it has no weeds at all. This is not only a waste of money, but it is also bad and costly.

Weeds hurt farming all over the world a lot. India loses almost INR 11 billion worth of crops to weeds every year. The US and Canada together lose more than USD and CAD 43 billion worth of crops every year (Shamshiri *et al*., 2024). The most common response is to spray herbicides all over the place, but this causes serious problems, such as chemical residues in food and water, harm to helpful insects like bees, and the growing problem of "herbicide resistance," where weeds change and survive even after being sprayed.

Using sensors to manage weeds is a smarter way to go. Instead of spraying the whole field, sensors on farm machines scan the ground all the time, find weeds in real time, and only spray those exact spots. Research shows that this method can cut herbicide use by 60 to 90%, which is good for both the farmer's wallet and the environment (Christensen *et al*., 2009). This article talks about how this technology works, what kinds of sensors are available, what farmers have seen as a result, and what still needs to be done before every farmer can benefit.

How Sensors "See" Weeds

The most logical question is: how can a machine tell the difference between a weed and a crop? The answer has to do with light, specifically how plants reflect light in different ways. Every plant, from a rice seedling to a barnyard grass weed, reflects light in its own special way. Some of this light, like near-infrared light, is not visible to the human eye. These differences can be picked up by special cameras and sensors, which can then quickly decide whether to leave the plant alone or spray it.

Optoelectronic sensors are the simplest type of sensor. They can tell the difference between the green color of a living plant and the brown color of the soil. They set off a spray nozzle as soon as they see a green plant in an area where there should only be dirt. This is how commercial products like WeedSeeker® and WEED-it® work. More advanced sensors use hyperspectral cameras that can tell different types of weeds apart by the way they reflect light. This makes them useful even when crops and weeds grow next to each other and look the same to the naked eye.

Types of Sensors Used on Farms

There are differences between sensors. Different farms, crops, and situations need different tools:

- **RGB cameras:** work the same way as regular phone cameras. They are cheap and simple to use. They can easily tell the difference between green plants and bare soil, but they might have trouble when crops and weeds are the same color.
- **Multispectral and hyperspectral cameras:** can see things that the human eye can't, like light waves that are too short or too long. They are much more accurate and can tell one kind of plant from another with a lot of confidence.
- **Optoelectronic sensors (WeedSeeker® and WEED-it®):** These quickly and accurately find any green plants in a bare field or between rows of crops. WeedSeeker® has helped sugarcane farms cut their use of herbicides by more than 80%.
- **LiDAR and ultrasonic sensors:** use sound waves or laser pulses to make a 3D picture of the field. They are especially good at

measuring how thick or tall weeds are, even when they are hiding in the crop.

- **GPS and RTK-GPS:** These don't find weeds on their own, but they do tell the machine where it is in the field to within a few centimeters. This makes sure that the spray goes to the right place and not a meter away from it.

Drones and Robots: The New Farm Workers

Sensors work even better when they are connected to machines that can move around the field and do something with what the sensor finds. Drones with multispectral cameras can fly over a whole field in minutes and make a detailed map that shows exactly where the weeds are. These weed maps are then sent to a smart sprayer or ground robot that moves through the field and sprays only the areas that have been marked. This two-step system, which starts with mapping and ends with spraying, makes sure that no chemicals are wasted on clean ground.

Ground robots go even further. For example, Blue River Technology's See & Spray combines cameras and spray equipment on the same vehicle. The robot scans and sprays in one pass as it moves through the field, making decisions in less than a second. In tests with camera-guided weeding robots, researchers found that they could remove 72–96% of weeds (Gerhards *et al*. 2020) in the spaces between rows and up to 91% of weeds within the rows themselves. These numbers are similar to what chemicals can do, but without the chemical cost or harm to the environment. Some robots use mechanical arms or laser beams instead of chemicals to pull weeds out of the ground or burn them with a precise heat pulse.

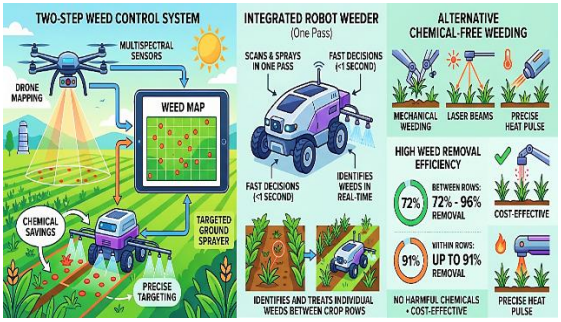

Figure 1. Precision agriculture utilizing drone-based weed mapping alongside targeted and chemical-free robotic weeding systems.

Money Saved, Environment Protected

In the end, a farmer only cares about two things: how much it costs and how much it makes. When it comes to both, sensor-based weed management does well. The most direct way to save money is on herbicides. You use a lot less chemical if you only spray where the weeds are instead of the whole field. Studies have found that using less herbicide can save you up to 90% on grass weeds and 60% on broad-leaved weeds. These savings add up to a lot over a whole growing season on hundreds of acres. Smart machines can do things faster and more accurately than people walking, which also lowers labor costs.

The good things for the environment are just as real. Less chemicals in the field means cleaner soil, less runoff into rivers and groundwater, and less harm to bees, butterflies, and other helpful bugs. It also means that plants will take longer to become resistant to herbicides, which is a big problem around the world. Fields that are better cared for tend to stay healthy longer, which means better crop yields in the future as well.

Challenges Still to Overcome

Weed control using sensors is very promising, but it has its problems, and it wouldn't be fair to ignore them. Cost is the biggest problem right now. A complete system, which includes a drone, cameras, GPS, and a smart sprayer, can cost tens of thousands of dollars. This

investment pays off quickly for a big commercial farm in Europe or North America. But this price is just too high for a small-scale farmer in India, Africa, or Southeast Asia who works on a few acres. But new, easier-to-use, low-cost devices are coming out. One open-source device, Open Weed Locator, was put together for only AU$400 using cheap parts that are easy to find. In field tests, it was able to find weeds with up to 92% accuracy. These kinds of low-cost solutions could be the key to getting this technology to smaller farms.

Another problem is being accurate in real-world situations. Cloud shadows, leaves that are on top of each other, wet soil, and crops that are at different stages of growth can all confuse sensors and cause them to miss weeds or accidentally spray crops. A lot of farmers don't know how to do regular maintenance and calibration on these systems yet (Vignesh *et al*., 2025). These barriers should get smaller as the technology gets better and prices go down, but for now they are still real problems that need to be dealt with honestly.

CONCLUSION

We are changing how we think about farming with sensor-based weed management. For hundreds of years, the way people dealt with weeds was to spray everything and then ask questions later. The new way of thinking is the opposite: first, look, then understand the problem, and finally act only where it is needed. This technology isn't magic. It is useful, works, and is already being used on farms all over the world. Smart sensors find weeds, drones make maps of the damage, and robots do the spraying. The farmer saves money and the environment gets a break. This is not just a useful technology for farmers whose costs are going up and every drop of water and every rupee counts. It is a must. The science is sound. The tools are getting better and less expensive. The last step is to give these tools to every farmer who needs them.

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