

French govt under fire for putting pesticide phase-out on hold

February 2 2024, by Gabriel Bourovitch



Greens MEP Marie Toussaint argued that pesticides have been linked to increased risk of illness for farmers.

France's government was on the defensive on Friday after environmental campaigners and opposition politicians accused it of having scrapped a

key green policy to appease protesting farmers.

Agricultural workers started to lift roadblocks after more than a week of demonstrations, following government promises of cash and eased regulation.

Among the concessions announced by Agriculture Minister Marc Fesneau on Thursday was that a 15-year-old government plan to stem dependence on insecticides and weedkillers would be put on hold.

The latest version of the Ecophyto plan had aimed to reduce the use of pesticides by 2030 to half of 2015-2017 levels.

But growers see the plan as yet another hurdle to their earning a decent living, as they compete with cheaper imports from countries with less stringent environmental regulations.

They complain that no viable alternatives to the pesticides are available.

Greens and left-wing politicians, as well as NGOs, have condemned Thursday's announcement.

But government spokeswoman Prisca Thevenot on Friday morning defended the move, saying measures to reduce pesticide use so far had not worked and needed rethinking.

It "made for great marketing slogans" but "without any solution to take care of farmers", she said.

The government "is working on the Ecophyto 2030 plan", but will "spend an extra month on it to ensure it is perfectly understood as support, not punishment" for farmers.

"Farmers themselves want more than anyone to stop using these products, because they are the first victims," Thevenot said.

"We need to be able to help them, which is why we are massively investing in finding alternative solutions," she added, without elaborating on what those might be.



Domestic farmers say they face harsher pesticide rules than countries exporting food to France.

'A poisoned chalice'

President Emmanuel Macron made the environment a key pillar of his

2022 re-election campaign.

But he alarmed activists when he urged the European Union last year to pause [environmental regulations](#) as he presented a plan to "reindustrialize" France.

Macron said at the time that Europe had already done far more than other industrial powers.

The head of France's biggest rural union the FNSEA, Arnaud Rousseau, said on Friday the measure to halt pesticide reduction would help "recreate trust" between the agricultural sector and the state.

"I want to find solutions. We need to do that straight away," he told broadcaster RMC.

He acknowledged that it would "take time" to find a way to "motivate everybody" in the sector.

But environmentalists have criticized Thursday's decision.

"It's a poisoned chalice for the farmers," Marie Toussaint, a Greens member of the European Parliament said on Friday.

Pesticides have been linked to increased risk of illness as well as bird and insect mortality, she argued.

Agriculture had to move on to a greener model, she told RMC radio.

"It's lying to the farmers to tell them that everything can be put on pause," she said.

Clementine Autain, a lawmaker from the left-wing France Unbowed

(LFI) party, said the government's decision was "total madness from an environment point of view".

She said it may suit those represented by the FNSEA, but was "not in the interest of most farmers, and certainly not in the interest of French people's health".

Greenpeace France on Thursday on X, formerly Twitter, warned that it was a "major and dangerous setback".

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