

Swiss snub synthetic pesticide ban plan

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The debate over the two anti-pesticide proposals was a bitter one.

Switzerland on Sunday rejected proposals that would have made it the first European country to ban synthetic pesticides following a bitterly fought campaign.

Voters backed the government's call and rejected the two publicly

proposed initiatives that would have changed the landscape for Swiss farming.

A majority of both voters and cantons is required to push through popular initiatives, but the two proposals failed on both counts, as 61 percent of voters and all but one of 26 cantons snubbed the initiatives.

"This is a reasonable and pragmatic decision which guarantees the future of our agriculture and the country's food security," Swiss President Guy Parmelin told journalists.

The result "gives the agricultural sector the chance to pursue transitional reforms towards more sustainable production", he said.

Meanwhile controversial sweeping new police powers to combat terrorism passed with 57 percent backing, to the dismay of international rights campaigners such as Amnesty International.

Under Switzerland's direct democracy system, referendums and popular votes occur every few months at national, regional and local levels.

Any idea from the public can be put to a national vote if it gathers 100,000 signatures from the 8.6 million population, but these so-called popular initiatives require the double majority to pass.

To trigger a referendum on [new laws](#) agreed by parliament, you first need 50,000 signatures and then a simple majority of votes to pass.



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Pesticides debate

No major country has so far banned man-made pesticides. Bhutan announced in 2012 that it wanted to become the first nation in the world to turn its home-grown food and farmers 100 percent organic.

The Swiss debate on pesticides was a bitter one. Arsonists torched a trailer displaying "No" banners in the western Vaud canton, while "Yes"-backing farmers said they had been the victims of insults, threats and intimidation.

A first popular initiative, entitled "For a Switzerland free from synthetic pesticides", called for a domestic ban within 10 years, and the outlawing of imported foodstuffs produced using such pesticides.

Under a second initiative, only farms not using pesticides, and only using antibiotics to treat sick animals, would have been eligible for government subsidies.

The amount of liquid manure being used on fields, and thereby potentially entering the water system, would also have been limited.

The Pesticides Initiative coalition behind the first proposal said the government should now "regularly test the population for pesticide residues".

It was unacceptable to approve [synthetic pesticides](#) then "turn a blind eye to their effects", it argued.

Anti-terror laws backed

The new anti-terror laws extend police powers to prevent future attacks, making it easier for them to take preventative action when faced with a "potential terrorist".



The Swiss government welcomed the rejection of the anti-pesticide proposals.

If police believe someone over the age of 12 is contemplating violent actions, the law allows them to conduct greater surveillance, limit their movements and oblige them to face questioning.

And with a court order, they can also place anyone over the age of 15 under house arrest for up to nine months.

While the wealthy nation has not seen the large-scale attacks witnessed in its European neighbours, the authorities insist the threat level is high.

"Switzerland will now have the world's most unprofessional, ineffective

and dangerous anti-terrorism law," Nils Melzer, the UN special rapporteur on torture, told AFP.

The expert, who does not speak for the UN but reports his findings to the global body, called the move "a major embarrassment for Switzerland as a modern democracy".

Amnesty Switzerland's campaign director Patrick Walder said: "Switzerland is giving itself an imprecise definition of terrorism which opens the door to arbitrary police action."

CO2 and Covid

Voting on another proposal, 52 percent rejected new carbon dioxide laws that would have used tax policy to cut [greenhouse gas emissions](#) by 50 percent of 1990 levels by 2030.

The laws would have increased the tax on fuel oil and natural gas, and imposed a tax on outbound flight tickets, while introducing [financial incentives](#) to install charging points for electric vehicles.

Environment minister Simonetta Sommaruga said the result was a rejection of the law, not climate protection.

Some 60 percent of voters backed new laws prolonging government measures to mitigate the Covid-19 pandemic's consequences for the economy and society.

The laws, challenged by a referendum, regulate financial aid granted to individuals and businesses, including compensation for loss of income, and support for cultural organisations.

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