

French rebel mayors defy government by imposing illicit pesticide bans

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Sébastien Salom-Gomis, AFP | Supporters of French anti-pesticide Mayor Daniel Cueff stand outside a Rennes court, holding a banner reading 'Madame prefect, let our mayors protect us'.

It all began when Daniel Cueff, the mayor of Langouët in Brittany, on May 18 climbed onto a wooden box dressed in white protective gear and announced to his village that he had imposed a ban on pesticide use within 150 metres of the district's homes and workplaces. "It is legitimate for a mayor to take action when there is incompetence by the state," he said, referring to the 2009 European Union directive that requires member states "to take steps to protect residents from pesticides".

In 2015, the World Health Organization presented findings that suggested that glyphosate, which is widely used in pesticides such as Monsanto's Roundup, is "[probably carcinogenic](#)". Although the European Union in 2017 renewed its authorisation of the use of glyphosate for [another five years](#), France – which is currently one of Europe's heaviest users of the pesticide – has vowed to outlaw its use in the country by 2021.

But according to Cueff, in whose village several children have been found to have "very high levels" of glyphosate in their urine, the government's ambition is too far off. Local non-organic farmers, meanwhile, have argued that the buffer-zones have hurt their businesses and that they have been provided with no alternatives to keep weeds off their crops.

At the end of August, an administrative court in Rennes ruled that Cueff had overstepped his authority by imposing the ban, deeming it unlawful. He immediately vowed to appeal the ruling, however, saying that as a mayor, he "could not ignore the health of local residents".

Pesticide crusade

Cueff's crusade on pesticides has since encouraged dozens of other French mayors to follow suit, and by the beginning of September, some 40 local decision-makers had imposed similar pesticide buffer-zones in towns and villages across France.

Clothilde Ollier, the mayor of the southern village of Murles, told FRANCE 24 that she had joined the growing movement of imposing illegal bans on September 3.

"It's in solidarity with [Cueff's district] Langouët," she said, adding that as small-town mayors "we only have one single objective: to protect the interest of our inhabitants".

Ollier, who is also a trained nurse, said she had decided to impose the ban in her village of 320 people because she was concerned that pesticides might have, among other things, contaminated the local drinking water. "I'm out in the field and I see bees dying, and in the hospital I see the damage done [to people] by pesticides: Parkinson's disease, small boys being born with micro-penises and young girls entering puberty prematurely. We have to ban glyphosate. It's not in 2021 that we need to deal with this problem. We don't have any more time!"

Ollier said she had already been ordered to withdraw her ban, but that she had no intention of doing so even though it will likely mean that she will be tried in court over it. "We won't win in court, we know that already. But it's like asbestos, we need to shift the lines by acting as a collective," she said.

'Forced to get food elsewhere'

Last week, the French government announced that it had started work on legislation to create residential buffer zones for pesticides, but said any legislation would have to include the possibility of adapting to local circumstances, implying that it would be evaluated on a case by case basis.

On Wednesday, however, France's Agriculture Minister Didier Guillaume [lashed out](#) at the growing number of mayors imposing the illicit 150-metre bans. "150 metres is out of the question," Guillaume told broadcaster Europe 1, warning that with such large areas becoming extinct from non-organic farming, the French "would be forced to get food elsewhere" as it would threaten the country's overall food production. Instead, he said it would be more realistic to envision a buffer zone of between one and five metres.