

'Ecocide'? Green groups blast France for lifting neonicotinoid pesticide ban to save sugar-beet growers

France has moved to reverse a ban on a class of pesticides only weeks after it came into force, reigniting a bitter dispute between environmentalists and farmers and embarrassing politicians who have championed ecological causes under President Emmanuel Macron.

The French cabinet's approval of a draft law allowing sugar beet growers to use neonicotinoids was portrayed by ministers as essential to save the country's sugar industry, the EU's largest.

"I don't want to abandon the sector and have my children eating only Belgian or German sugar," Julien Denormandie, agriculture minister, said in a television interview. Viruses spread by aphids have severely damaged this year's sugar beet crop in northern France.

Environmentalists, however, are up in arms. Delphine Batho, a centre-left MP and head of Génération Ecologie, a green NGO, rejected the reintroduction of the pesticides as "ecocide, an ecological catastrophe".

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"We don't accept that pollinators should be collateral damage," she said. The real problem is to use . . . a poison which stays in the ground and in the water for more than 20 years. We are mobilizing to stop the adoption of this law."

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[M]ore than a third of the French land under beet [production] has been affected by yellowing this year, reducing yields by an average of 40 per cent, and cutting the crop — which last year was 38m tonnes — by more than 5m tonnes, equivalent to 900,000 tonnes of sugar.

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