

Europe

As Agri-Bashing Grows in Europe, Some Farmers Seek to Reconnect Consumers to Their World

By Lisa Bryant

February 26, 2020 09:25 PM



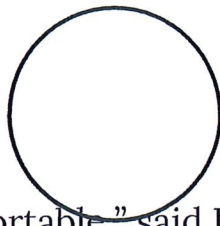
PARIS - Jerome Regnault guides a tractor through his fields on a windy afternoon, scanning a landscape west of Paris that is radically different from what it was during his grandfather's days.

Highways and housing projects are creeping in. Technology and international markets are increasingly driving his business.

Farmers like Regnault say they now face another unsettling phenomenon — agri-bashing, or verbal and sometimes physical abuse against their profession, over concerns about its detrimental effects on health, the environment and animal welfare.

Some French Farmers Try to Counter Attacks,
Reconnect With Consumers

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“It’s become unsupportable,” said Regnault, who hasn’t personally been attacked but has friends who have. “How can worries over agricultural practices justify people attacking farming material and buildings, and even physical violence against farmers?”

This sense of victimization is the backdrop for this week’s annual agricultural fair in Paris, a massive event that allows children to pet cows and French to reconnect with their rural heritage.

A growing farmers movement now aims to make that connection more durable. Some are posting videos on social media to explain their profession. Regnault and a group of colleagues launched a hotline for questions and concerns.

“We realized that while farming had a negative image, farmers were seen in a positive light,” said Regnault, whose group is called Ici La Terre (Here is Earth). “So, we decided to cultivate that.”

Hard times for European farmers

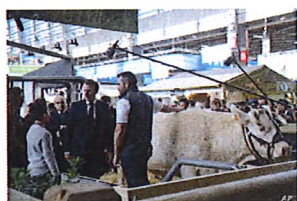
Across Europe and beyond, farmers face mounting pressure to feed a growing planet ever more cheaply — and increasingly, more sustainably. These days, they are pushing back.



Jerome Regnault consults his GPS. Technology and markets are increasingly driving his business. (Lisa Bryant/VOA)

In recent months, their tractors have clogged traffic in Germany, Spain, Ireland and the Netherlands, among other countries, to protest perceived injustices ranging from price dumping and feared cuts to European Union farm subsidies to free trade deals and tougher environmental regulations.

In France, authorities have established pesticide safe zones around communities and announced a ban on the herbicide glyphosate next year, ahead of the Brussels timetable. Environmentalists say both measures are insufficient. Farmers responded by dumping hay on the capital's elegant Champs-Élysées.



French President Emmanuel Macron speaks with a farmer during a visit to the International Agriculture Fair (Salon de l'Agriculture) at the Porte de Versailles exhibition center in Paris, Feb. 22, 2020.

At the Paris fair, French President Emmanuel Macron told farmers he would fight to keep the generous EU farm subsidies of which France is a top beneficiary. The funds would help them transition to more sustainable production methods, Macron said, adding, "It's a

policy of the future."

French authorities have also established a new unit, Demeter, to survey more extreme environmental militants who have invaded large farms to protest industrial-scale agriculture.

Yet some environmentalists say they, not farmers, are under siege.

"We believe agri-bashing doesn't exist — it's been invented by some in the profession who refuse to accept criticism," said Marie-Catherine Schulz-Vannaxay, agricultural coordinator for the conservation group France Nature Environnement. Referencing a

recent attack in Toulouse, she contends that some farmers are instead targeting environmental groups.

“There’s a real malaise, a fragility around this family farm model that in the past has always been a reference,” said sociologist Bertrand Hervieu, even as he noted the farming industry has faced crises before.

A century ago, agriculture dominated the French economy. Today, it accounts for less than 3% of the workforce. Farmers now compete with other rural groups for political attention. Roughly one-fifth live in poverty, findings show, and suicide levels are higher than the national average.

“Fundamentally, French aren’t hostile to the farming world,” said Hervieu, who believes agri-bashing rolls in a number of things, including today’s more violent society whose effects now reach the countryside. “But they want another agricultural model.”



The Paris agricultural fair is a time for French to reconnect with their roots, and local gastronomy. (Lisa Bryant/VOA)

Ici La Terre

Some farmers are indeed changing. A new survey finds roughly 10% of them have gone organic.

A grain farmer near the town of Versailles, Regnault, 45, instead practices "precision farming" — using technology to minimize the use of pesticides and other chemicals. While environmentalists like

Schulz-Vannaxay argue the practice is still harmful, Regnault contends the risks are minimized.

He points to bees he's been raising for several years as an example.

"We haven't had any deaths," he said.

Such topics are aired on the farming hotline. Launched in September, Ici La Terre now counts 130 farmers.

"We get questions about animal welfare and pesticide use," Regnault said about the call-ins. "We're not trying to convince people, just to explain what we do and exchange."



Organic food seller Gregory Framery is among a growing number of French rejecting intensive farming practices. (Lisa Bryant/VOA)

At the Paris farm fair, where the group has a stand, Maggy Luraschi admitted she was worried about plummeting insect populations.

"Pesticides and insecticides are a problem for me," she said, "but I've never thought badly of farmers. I grew up in a farm family."

Parisian Germain Milet, who spoke with Regnault, has a similar agricultural background.

"I know these two worlds do not understand each other, and I think it's a good opportunity to create these links," he said.

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strapped farmers.Many French farmers
are...



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