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French Winegrower Calls for Looser Vineyard Rules

He says warmer conditions in Gironde require growers to tailor vine spacing and canopy management to local soils.

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A French viticulturist and lawmaker said this week that the country’s vineyards need more flexibility, not tighter rules, to cope with a warmer climate that is already changing growing conditions in places such as Gironde.

Yves d’Amécourt, a winegrower in Sauveterre-de-Guyenne and a former elected official, made the case after a conference on April 28 at the National Assembly in Paris devoted to wine, consumption and climate adaptation. In remarks summarized after the event, he said average temperatures in Gironde have risen by 1.7°C since the late 1990s and argued that vineyard design should be adjusted to local soils and weather rather than forced into a single model.

His comments come as French wine regions face earlier harvests, more frequent heat spikes and pressure to reduce chemical inputs while maintaining quality. D’Amécourt said growers should be allowed to manage leaf canopy and vine height so that grapes receive the right balance of light and heat. He also called for planting density to vary according to soil type and climate, saying that what works in one part of a region may not work in another.

He pointed to the Entre-Deux-Mers area of Gironde, where he said there are 47 distinct soil profiles, as an example of why uniform rules can be counterproductive. In his view, a vineyard planted on one type of ground should not be required to follow the same layout as another planted nearby under different conditions.

The debate over vineyard density has long divided French wine producers and regulators. Traditional appellation rules often favor closely spaced vines, but some growers now argue that wider rows can improve airflow, reduce disease pressure and lower fuel use by making tractor passes more efficient. D’Amécourt said wider spacing can cut the distance machinery must travel through a vineyard and therefore reduce energy consumption.

He also linked vineyard structure to environmental practices now often described as agroecological. Among the measures he cited were cover crops to limit vine vigor, reduced herbicide use through grassing between rows and lower pesticide use overall. He argued that these changes should be left to producers who know their land best rather than imposed through rigid national standards.

The conference brought together industry leaders, researchers and representatives from France’s wine institutions for three round tables on consumption, climate adaptation and public policy. Participants included Samuel Montgermont of Vin &

Société, Jean-Marie Fabre of Vignerons Indépendants, Bernard Angelras of the French Institute of Vine and Wine, Bernard Farges of the national wine committee CNIV and the Bordeaux wine council CIVB, among others.

D’Amécourt said his position was not new. He recalled publishing an article in 2003 defending “wide and tall vines,” a view he said was ahead of its time but now looks more relevant as growers confront hotter summers and pressure to produce wines with lower alcohol levels and better balance.

He said sunlight in Gironde has not increased overall but has become more concentrated in summer months, making canopy management more important. In his account, the central issue is not whether vineyards should adapt to climate change, but whether regulation should allow growers enough room to do so.

That argument is gaining traction in parts of the French wine sector. The National Institute for Origin and Quality has called for simpler specifications in appellation rulebooks because of limited staff for enforcement, while the CNAOC, which represents appellation producers, has pushed for greater freedom in technical choices. Several regions have also begun testing lower planting densities.

For D’Amécourt, the broader question is political as much as agronomic: whether France will trust winegrowers to make technical decisions based on their own terroirs. He said adaptation will come from giving producers more freedom to adjust their vineyards to local realities rather than from adding another layer of rules.