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The controversy over Europe's pesticide measurement

France Considers adopting controversial EU indicator

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In the heart of Europe's ongoing struggle to balance agricultural productivity with environmental sustainability, France finds itself at a crossroads, caught between the demands of its farmers and the concerns of environmental NGOs. The country's recent decision to reconsider its pesticide reduction strategy, Ecophyto, in favor of adopting a European Union-wide measurement indicator, has sparked a significant controversy. This indicator, known as the Harmonized Risk Indicator 1 (HRI-1), incorporates a factor of molecular toxicity, a move that has drawn criticism for its alleged shortcomings.

The heart of the discord lies in the method used to measure the dangers of pesticide use. Until recently, France utilized the "NODU" indicator, which focused on the volume of pesticides relative to the area treated. This approach is distinct from the HRI-1, which looks more closely at the toxicity of the active ingredients in pesticides. The transition to HRI-1 is seen by some as a step backwards in the fight against hazardous pesticides, as it reportedly underestimates the danger of certain active substances.

Critics argue that the European indicator could penalize less toxic substances, including those used in organic farming, by not adequately distinguishing between different levels of toxicity. For example, natural treatments like sulfur, commonly used in organic agriculture, are deemed significantly riskier under HRI-1 than synthetic chemicals employed in conventional farming. This discrepancy could inadvertently harm the organic farming sector, which is ironically a key component of the EU's "Farm to Fork" strategy aimed at creating a more sustainable food system.

The debate over the HRI-1 indicator is not limited to France. In Brussels, the European Court of Auditors has called for improvements to the indicator, suggesting that the European Commission develop new metrics that better reflect the cultural specificities and volumes of active substances used. The criticism stems from a broader concern that the current approach fails to accurately monitor the effects and risks associated with pesticide use.

Despite these concerns, some industry voices argue that the HRI-1 is a step in the right direction, emphasizing the need for a standardized method to measure pesticide risk reduction across the EU. They argue that harmonizing indicators could help reconcile the need for agricultural productivity with environmental and consumer health protection.

As France teeters on the edge of adopting the HRI-1, the debate underscores a larger dilemma facing the EU: how to effectively reduce pesticide use while supporting farmers and ensuring food security. The French government's decision, expected to be announced in the lead-up to the International Agricultural Show, will not only affect the country's agricultural policy but also signal the EU's commitment to a greener, more sustainable future.

Amid this controversy, the call for a mixed indicator that considers both the volume of pesticides and their toxicity underscores the complexity of achieving a truly sustainable agricultural system. Whether France will pave the way for a new approach or adhere to the contested European standard remains to be seen. What is clear, however, is that the outcome of this debate will have lasting implications for the environment, farmers, and consumers alike.