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Bordeaux Vine Pulling Program Falls Short of Initial Goals

Bordeaux Wine Crisis Deepens as Vineyard Cuts Lag

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In the lush, sprawling vineyards of Bordeaux, a significant restructuring effort is underway, yet recent reports indicate that the program aimed at reducing vineyard acreage has not met its ambitious targets. In 2022, Bordeaux boasted approximately 108,000 hectares of vineyards, with a funded initiative to remove around 9,500 hectares in the Gironde region. This initiative was supported by a financial package amounting to 57 million euros, of which 38 million were provided by the government,

with the remaining funds coming from the Bordeaux Wine Council (CIVB).

The president of CIVB, Allan Sichel, had initially highlighted a pressing issue: the region was grappling with an annual overproduction of 300,000 hectoliters of wine—equivalent to 40 million bottles—compounded by an additional 200,000 hectoliters sold at unprofitable prices. The CIVB's strategy was that by pulling up approximately 10% of the vineyards, the region could achieve a sustainable balance. However, according to local newspaper Sud-Ouest, only about 3,000 hectares have been removed so far, which is significantly below the program's initial goals, leaving two-thirds of the target still unmet.

The primary reason for this delay has been inclement weather, particularly rain. The CIVB has noted that drier conditions are expected to expedite the program. Beyond supply and demand challenges, vineyards are also contending with mildew and other diseases, which have driven the need for vine removal.

This year's growing season has been affected by these conditions, leading to a likely reduction in the harvest, potentially mitigating the supply-demand issues. Stéphane Héraud of the CIVB remarked that a shortage is "almost certain," expressing confidence that the supply challenges would eventually be overcome.

Earlier in 2023, Bordeaux's winegrowers organized strikes to draw attention to the pressures they face. The previous year, extreme weather events severely impacted vineyards, resulting in significant losses for some growers. The yield of AOC wine was about 11% below the ten-year average, producing 4.1 million hectoliters.

Much of the focus has been on providing support for the excess vine pulling and storage of unsold wines. During last year's growing season, a hotline was even established for "desperate" growers struggling with the severe weather's impact on their crops. Nicolas Morain of MSA Gironde, the local branch of France's agricultural social mutual organization, reported calls from individuals in profound distress, including one instance where a viticulturist's wife called in tears.

"Some have already lost everything," Morain stated, noting that the pervasive mildew this year was unprecedented. For many growers, the relentless mildew has been a severe blow, prompting some to reconsider their careers in viticulture. The emotional and financial toll has been significant, underscoring the challenges facing the Bordeaux wine industry.

As the region contends with these multifaceted issues, the hope is that drier weather will allow for a catch-up in the vine pulling program. However, the broader implications for Bordeaux's wine production and the well-being of its viticulturists remain areas of deep concern. The resilience of Bordeaux's wine industry is being tested as never before, requiring both immediate and long-term strategies to secure its future.