

French farmers block refineries to protest palm oil import



Paris, June 13 (RHC)-- Farmers in France have blocked access to several oil depots and refineries in protest – that is organized to last several days – against the proposed use of imported palm oil at a Total bio-fuel plant.

According to the president of the National Federation of Agricultural Holders' Unions, Christiane Lambert, 13 sites were blocked earlier this week, following five that were blocked over the weekend. The companies, on the other hand, have urged people to not panic-buy gas as it would result in shortages.

Some 200 farmers dumped dirt on the roads leading to the Total refinery in Grandpuits Sunday night, as well as parked about 40 tractors, president of the Jeunes Agricultures, Sebastien Guerinot, said. "We are only blocking Total's fuel trucks that want to get in or out. Not the staff, nor other vehicles, nor help," Guerinot told the press. The farmers also used tons of onions, wood and rubble to obstruct the roadways.

Farm Minister Stephane Travert pushed back against the farmers, stating that the blockades were illegal and will be futile as the government's decision to allow Total's importation of palm oil will remain in effect. "This blockade cannot be the solution to the discussion that we are going to have. This blockade is illegal. It is not by blocking refineries that we are going to find adequate solutions," Travert told RTL Radio.

Last month, authorities gave Total permission to use palm oil as a feedstock. The farmers are strongly opposed to the importation of the product which, they say, will likely cut into the profits of locally produced rapeseed oil. Palm oil is cheaper than rapeseed oil. “Our target is the state,” Lambert said, adding that Total’s decision on palm oil was “the last straw.”

Environmentalists have blamed palm oil cultivation for deforestation in southeast Asia. Some European lawmakers are pushing for a ban on palm oil use in biofuel, citing its effect on the environment.

Contrastingly, Malaysian officials have warned of possible trade repercussions that could affect a French fighter jet deal. Indonesia and Malaysia are the two largest producers of palm oil.

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