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Switzerland's emergency stocks

The availability of goods vital for human life is becoming more of an issue in view of global conflicts and pandemics. Switzerland has kept emergency supplies for its people since the world wars – and aims to be even more well prepared for future crises.



Caffeine in a crisis: importers like La Semeuse in La Chaux-de-Fonds store a mandatory stockpile totalling 18,000 tonnes of green coffee.
Photo: Sophie Steiger 13Photo

most coffee drinkers) came out against it. The Federal Council ultimately backed down – not least on “psychological grounds”.

Food and warmth

Defining which goods are important for survival is “not an exact science”, says Peter Lehmann, head of Compulsory Stocks at the Federal Office for National Economic Supply. The key criterion for foodstuffs is the number of calories: the authorities work on the basis of an average energy consumption of about 2,300 calories per person per day. Accordingly, tens of thousands of tonnes of non-perishable foodstuffs such as rice, wheat, cooking oils and fats, sugar and the ingredients needed to make yeast are stockpiled. The compulsory stocks also hold fertilisers and canola seeds for agriculture. These reserves are enough to meet the needs of Switzerland’s population for three to four months.

13 Swiss francs per person

THEODORA PETER
Could you go without your morning coffee in the event of a crisis? In Switzerland, you won’t have to, as the government has contingency planning in place: importers have more than 18,000 tonnes of coffee bean stocks in reserve. This mandatory reserve is enough to meet demand from the country’s coffee drinkers for three months should there be an import outage. The real question is whether coffee, which has practically no nutritional value, is really as important to human survival as wheat or rice. The last time the authorities pondered this issue was during a review in 2019, when plans were made to remove coffee from the country’s emergency stockpile. This was met with strong resistance: not only suppliers but also consumers (bearing in mind that the Swiss are among the world’s fore-

The federal government does not hold the stocks itself. They are provided and managed by the relevant sector, for example grain mills, as they make flour out of wheat. “That means the goods are already where they are needed,” explains Lehmann. The 300 companies involved receive compensation for holding the stocks. This compensation is financed by import surcharges and fees: every inhabitant of the country pays 13 Swiss francs a year towards it.

Crisis survival involves more than having enough to eat. “A heated apartment is also a basic requirement,” explains Lehmann. The compulsory stores thus include heating oil and fuels, such as petrol, diesel and aviation gasoline. These reserves are released in the event of supply issues or supply chain gaps. In 2015, a strike in



Peter Lehmann,
head of Compulsory
Stocks at the Federal
Office for National
Economic Supply.
Photo supplied

France resulted in a shortage of aviation gasoline at Geneva airport. In 2018, a dry summer caused mineral oil supply issues: low water levels on the Rhine meant the ships could only load their holds up to one third of full capacity. In 2021, the country had to dip into its emergency fertiliser stocks due to supply problems on the global market. The Swiss agricultural sector is fully reliant on imports to meet its demand for fertiliser.

The pandemic revealed supply shortfalls

The country regularly accesses its strategic medical reserve supplies. From 2019 to 2022, there were 416 instances of medicines being taken from emergency stocks to pre-empt shortages, mainly for antibiotics. At the start of 2024, the authorities initiated additional measures. Obligatory storage and reporting were extended to include other substances in order to mitigate supply bottleneck risks.

There were major national supply issues during the coronavirus pandemic, with a shortage of face masks, ethanol and disinfectant. The Swiss Alcohol Board had kept ethanol reserves up to 2017 prior to its dissolution in the interests of deregulation,



Cultivation campaign during the Second World War

Harvesting potatoes in front of the Federal Palace: during the 1940s, wheat and potato growing spread to the cities. Switzerland aimed to become more self-sufficient by increasing its amount of arable land. Although the country fell well short of achieving its goal of agricultural autarky,

the authorities nonetheless considered the "Wahlen Plan" a success in terms of its morale boost: the cultivation campaign strengthened the people's resolve during a difficult political and military period. Photo: Keystone

which meant no more emergency ethanol stocks. No one suspected at the time how urgently ethanol would be needed just a short time later. The sector has since reestablished its reserve stock of the product.

The Ukraine war accentuated Europe's energy crisis. However, electricity cannot be kept in reserve. The Federal Council approved the construction of a reserve power station last year to ensure the country would be prepared in the event of an acute electricity shortage (see Review 2/2023).

Switzerland depends on imports

The origins of national economic supply go back to the early 20th century. Many goods were in short supply before the First World War, and the situation only became worse after that. At the start of the 1930s, the federal government obliged private mills to hold a certain volume of grain in reserve. In the Second World War, the authorities launched a veritable cultivation campaign to make Switzerland less dependent on imported foodstuffs. Although this goal was not achieved, the "Wahlen Plan" – named after the agriculture minister and subsequently Federal Councillor Friedrich Traugott

Medicines are one of the country's essential supplies. The mandatory stockpiles recently played a big part in ensuring those supplies. Photo: Keystone

Wahlen – did strengthen the people's resolve.

Following the world wars, the emergency stockpile was expanded in the interests of preserving security. Products including cacao, soap, coal, metals and screws were added to the mandatory reserves. During the Cold War, stocks were built up to last 12 months. However, the fall of the Iron Curtain and the advent of globalisation made stockpiling less of a priority, and reserves were scaled back

that they believed the priority should be on doing more to secure complex supply chains. In December 2023, the federal government commissioned a more detailed review. The government does not just want to know whether more products should be included in the compulsory stockpiles but also whether additional instruments are needed to monitor international supply chains of critical goods and services. The conclusions of the review should be published by the end of 2024.

Switzerland as a role model

By international comparison, Switzerland is something of a role model in its approach to stockpiling foodstuffs. That finding emerges from a country analysis commissioned by the Confederation from research institute Polynomics. The study covered the neighbouring countries of Germany, France, Italy, Austria, as well as Finland and the non-EU state Norway. These countries apply different approaches, ranging from Finland with its extensive national stockpiles to France, where there are no emergency food reserves, which is understandable as the country has a large agricultural sector and does not rely on imports.

In any case, Switzerland's penchant for hoarding coffee makes it a global anomaly: "If disaster strikes, the Swiss want to be caffeinated," is how the British publication "The Economist" reported on the matter with a hint of irony.

Dutti's underwater supplies

Migros founder Gottlieb Duttweiler was also mindful of the need to safeguard food supplies during the war years. On his own initiative, he organised the storage of big underwater tanks filled with wheat in Switzerland's lakes. He argued that the supplies would be more secure from bombing there than in warehouses. However, the Federal Council declined to take part in the project. "Dutti", as he was popularly known, went ahead with it anyway under his own steam and continued to store food underwater until the 1950s. Find out more at: www.revue.link/submarine



Bunker mentality during the Cold War

Civil defence shelters arose in many places during the 1970s to offer refuge to the Swiss in a state of emergency – pictured here is the now-decommissioned shelter in the Sonnenberg Tunnel, designed to accommodate 20,000 people. Besides the threat of nuclear conflict, the Cold War between the major powers also raised concerns over possible supply shortages. The mandatory reserves were kept well stocked – with adequate provisions for 12 months. Photo: Keystone



Precarious supply chains

Switzerland depends on imports for its needs. Besides pandemics and wars, climate change also impacts supply chains and logistics. During the 2018 summer drought, water levels in the Rhine (pictured here near Düsseldorf) were so low that ships

were only able to transport part of their normal load. Switzerland responded by releasing some of its mineral oil reserves to ensure there was enough petrol and heating oil. Photo: Keystone



What to store in your own cellar

“We advise – emergency supplies”: this over-50-year-old slogan has received a new lease of life since the coronavirus pandemic.

Empty pasta shelves, and a run on toilet paper in the supermarket: the coronavirus-induced lockdown in 2020 triggered supply fears and panic buying. The shelves emptied more quickly than retailers could fill them, which only stoked anxieties further.

The authorities recommend that people keep personal supplies at home to last for about a week. “That way, people can respond more calmly to difficult situations and avoid becoming nervous or panicking,” states an official brochure available in French, German and Italian, the title of which translates into English as “We advise – emergency supplies”. The slogan is over 50 years old – and it has been revived by the global crises.



Photo: Keystone

Your personal supplies should contain enough food for a week – it's even more important to have drinking water for at least three days.

The first thing to stockpile is non-perishable foodstuffs, for example rice, pasta products, oil, ready-made meals, salt, sugar, coffee, tea, dried fruit, muesli, rusks, chocolate, UHT milk, hard cheese, dried meat and preserves. Drinks are equally if not more important: every household should store nine litres of water per person. That is enough to provide three days of drinking and cooking water in the event of an emergency. Although Switzerland has an almost unlimited supply of drinking water, supply interruptions could still happen due to broken pipes or contamination. In such a case, water companies are obliged to provide people with a minimum amount of drinking water from the fourth day.

Spare batteries and cash

You should also keep items at home that can be of use in the event of an

electricity outage: battery-operated radios, torches, spare batteries, candles, matches and a gas cooker. Medicine, toiletries, pet food and small cash sums should also be kept at hand.

It is advisable to use your food reserves for everyday cooking, i.e. keep using them and replacing any used items. The contents of the freezer also count as emergency supplies: you can still consume frozen foods after an electricity outage. Once thawed, however, food should not be refrozen.

Offers from private companies for “complete solutions” with canned food for one month or longer far exceed the government recommendations. Their customers include preppers, who want to be well prepared with everything they need to keep going in the event of a crisis – tents, radio devices, tools etc. There are detailed checklists for crisis survival online.

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Link to the brochure (in German):
revue.link/notvorrat