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EDITORIAL

Where to for the Swiss dairy farmer...?

During our recent visit to the 'old country', it became inevitable that I should compare our New Zealand dairy farming fortunes with those of Switzerland's dairy farmers.

A late night television documentary ("Spuren der Zeit" - Legacies of times past) screened by SF1 (Schweizer Fernsehen 1) provided a 'golden opportunity' to do so. I found this production well in accord with discussions I was fortunate to have had with dairy farming families we had visited. The documentary showed pictures and gave commentaries by experts dealing with aspects of Swiss farming, mainly milk production, over the past century.

Times of so-called progress in the mechanisation of agriculture through the introduction of the tractor, me-

chanical harvesting machinery and the introduction of the milking machine were documented. I especially recall the cynical expression (about the negative side of progress) by one of the members of the panel discussion group that followed the screening, as he remarked that milking cows in Switzerland would still be profitable if the milking machine had never been invented.

This remark bears some truth (as I understand it), since the Swiss dairy farmers' subsidies have been shifted from 'produce subsidies', sustaining a high return for milk delivered by the farmer, to 'subsidies per hectare of land'. The Swiss dairy farmer (down to the smallest land owner) has until recent years improved his breed of cows by introducing new blood, such as Swiss Brown, Friesian, and now even Jersey. Now it is sad to find many Swiss dairy farmers questioning their "purpose

of being"; looking for direction and not finding it; receiving huge subsidies and loathing the regulations and restrictions imposed on their farming operation; and open to the snide remarks handed out by a reluctant Swiss tax payer, only too well aware of the farmer's subsidies having such a bearing on high taxes.

Whenever I expressed some sympathy for the plight of today's Swiss dairy farmer (coming from a mountain dairy farming family myself), I received a cynical laugh from most of my non-farming friends.

However, nobody seemed prepared to indicate how the small Swiss dairy farmer is supposed to compete against the average EU dairy farmer, except with the radical solution that they should amalgamate to create EU-sized dairy farms.

Recognising the antipathy of the non-farming Swiss tax payer, the traditional Swiss dairy farmer is trying to win favour by inviting the village people, or city population, at specific times to a 'farmer's breakfast on the farm' (Buurezmorge auf dem Bauernhof), or by offering cheap 'holidays on the farm'. Traditional farming exhibitions, like the OLMA (Ostscheizerische Landwirtschaftliche Milchwirtschafts Ausstellung), are used to increase understanding of the plight of the small-scale Swiss dairy farmer.

Despite all of this, the purpose of milking cows in Switzerland seems lost and the prospect of eventually competing with EU milk returns is an impossible expectation...

The Swiss dairy farmer points out the importance his forebears played during World War 2 in feeding the country's population of that time...! He also points out how important his 'contribution of today' is, by keeping the countryside clean and green for the benefit of the tourist industry, and as you may already know, just about every square meter of land in our 'old country' is beautifully kept, even the non-productive parts!

Just as the Kiwi dairy farmer has experienced, so the Swiss dairy farmer recognises that subsidies are for most of his kind like shackles on his farming operation. He knows that in due time, subsidies (SFR1,500 per month per labour unit, according to statistics) will be further reduced, in order to resemble the ones found in EU states. The result is that milk production, pushed to extremes a few years ago, is now discouraged

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