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OECD calls for farming reform

Swiss agricultural subsidies are the third highest in the world, too much according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

In its 2007 report on its members' farming policies, OECD said subsidies to prop up domestic prices had dropped significantly in Switzerland but there was still room for improvement.

Further reform is needed – both to improve the domestic performance of farm policies and to contribute to more open markets for trade in agriculture and food.

But Jacques Bourgeois, director of the Swiss Farmers' Association (SFA), says the OECD does not understand how the country's agricultural system works.

"If you look at the financing Swiss agriculture receives, much of it is for direct payments set out in a constitutional mandate approved by voters in 1996. Farming is no longer just about producing food, but also looking after our landscapes and natural resources. Switzerland has taken a leading role in reforming agriculture. We are meeting consumer expectations," he said. "There are also government polls that show the population supports Swiss agricultural policy."

Direct payments have the advantage of not simply rewarding overproduction, and can selectively promote sectors of farming working in line with Swiss agriculture policy, for instance, organic farming.

Switzerland offers the third-highest subsidies among OECD

members, accounting for 66 per cent of farmers' incomes between 2004 and 2006. Only Iceland and Norway pay out more. The average is 34 per cent for the European Union, 11 per cent in the United States and five per cent in Australia. The OECD says the Swiss figure has fallen by 12 per cent over the past 20 years, a welcome evolution but still insufficient. Agricultural subsidies in Switzerland are equivalent to 1.6 per cent of the country's gross domestic product.

Swiss farmers need SFr2.5 billion (\$1.96 billion) in direct payments or state subsidies every year, whether or not they face competition. Some estimates suggest that supporting farming costs the Swiss taxpayer SFr4 billion annually.

Production and consumer prices have also dropped. Two decades ago Swiss prices were five times the worldwide average; today they are just double. Bourgeois reckons it would be unfair to expect farmers to drop their prices any further. "I don't think any other economic sector has undergone as many changes in recent times," he said. "Six to eight farms close for business every working day in Switzerland."

Many of the remaining ones survive only because their farmers have taken up a second occupation. Farms with a surface of more than 20 hectares have bucked this trend though, with their numbers increasing. Swiss farmers have suffered a drop in income of at least ten per cent in the past decade.

from swissinfo

Migros buys Denner

Switzerland's largest supermarket group, Migros, can complete the acquisition of discount chain Denner, but only if it meets strict conditions. When the deal was announced, industry observers praised the deal as a perfect fit for both parties as it married the size of Migros with Denner's alcohol

and cigarette products. Migros sells neither, because its founder, Gottlieb Duttweiler, said they were a threat to good health and the family. Denner must operate independently for seven years or until German discounters Aldi and Lidl have opened 250 stores in Switzerland.

from swissinfo

Bluetongue reaches Switzerland

The Swiss veterinary authorities have registered the first case of bluetongue disease in the country. The illness, which is not considered dangerous for humans but can devastate animal herds, has spread from Germany and France and is affecting much of northwestern Europe.

The Federal Veterinary Office announced that six of 19 animals in a herd had tested positive for bluetongue. One cow presented severe symptoms and was put down. The viral disease is transmitted by insect bites; in this case a particular species of midge. It is not passed on between animals.

Even if bluetongue is not dangerous for humans, the meat from infected animals is not used and their carcasses are eliminated. Owners are reimbursed 90 per cent of a diseased animal's value by the Swiss authorities. A protection zone with a 20-kilometre radius was set up around the farm. Cows, sheep and goats will not be allowed to leave the area except to be slaughtered and only with permission from the cantonal vet. Other measures inside the zone include moving animals inside before dusk. The aim of the authorities is to slow the spread of the disease by preventing diseased ruminants from travelling to other parts of Switzerland and to avoid contact between animals and midges.

But there is a high chance that the disease will continue to progress and that there will be more outbreaks, the veterinary office has warned. Bluetongue only appears two to three weeks after infection, meaning more cases might be on the way. The authorities are hoping for a spell of cold weather that would cut the insect population.

According to the World Organisation for Animal Health, there is no treatment available for bluetongue. Vaccination is also problematic because it must correspond closely to the infection in a given area.

from swissinfo