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Frustration mounts within Swiss dairy industry

Swiss mountains like the Matterhorn are famous, but the one that never appears on a postcard is the so-called "Butterberg" – made with surplus milk. That surplus amounted to 10,000 tons back in August, but was whittled down to 5,000 tons by late November. Yet the melting heap of butter was one of the only bright spots at an assembly of the Swiss milk industry, where the focus was on problems within the Swiss milk industry.

This umbrella organisation represents all sectors of the industry, from dairy farmers to cheese makers to retailers. It was established after the Swiss milk market was deregulated in 2009. The expectations of the various players within the industry put a great deal of pressure on the organisation. Expectations are extremely varied. There are still dairy farmers who expect a direct influence on the market – like quotas and consolidated prices – but that's just not possible, also for legal reasons. The organisation can introduce stabilising measures, such as a recommended milk price. In early November it reduced the suggested price by four cents, bringing it down to SFr0.64 per kilo. Though it is only a recommendation, this move was highly unpopular with dairy farmers.

The Swiss Farmers Association criticised the move. "The retailers, factories and traders all make money, but not the dairy farmers. On average they only earn SFr12 per hour. This situation is absolutely unsatisfactory, and the milk price is partly to blame. The dairy farmers need a spokesperson who focuses on the milk producers' interests."

As it stands, Swiss dairy farmers earn about SFr0.20 more per kilo of milk than their European counterparts.

Lead levels among Swiss drop sharply

Concentrations of lead in the blood of the Swiss population have fallen considerably since the phasing out of leaded petrol in the 1980s. In a Federal Health Office study adults were found to have 20.6 micrograms of lead on average per litre of blood ($\mu\text{g/l}$), while children had a level of 14.7 $\mu\text{g/l}$. These results are well below the World Health Organization safety threshold of 100 $\mu\text{g/l}$, set in 1995, although some scientists claim that exposure to lead at lower levels can also be harmful. The dramatic fall in lead levels in recent decades can mainly be attributed to the introduction of unleaded petrol in 1985, the study says. The average concentration level for children under ten in 1980 was an unsafe 125 $\mu\text{g/l}$.

The health office called the results satisfactory. Researchers measured blood lead levels of 329 adults and 74 children connected to the university hospital of Lausanne.

The dangers of lead poisoning have been known for a relatively long time. The Swiss first responded to the danger of water contamination in 1914 by banning the use of lead pipes in water piping. Lead paints were withdrawn in the 1950s but only specifically banned in 2003.

More than a quarter of a century of unleaded petrol has clearly been beneficial but because lead accumulates in the bone tissue and is very slow to leave the body, concentration levels are higher for older age groups, the study shows. People over 30, who were exposed to much higher levels of lead in the air before the switch to unleaded petrol, still have relatively high levels compared to the younger generation. People over 60 have levels twice the average for children.

The petrol reform ironed out air quality differences between urban and rural areas that were reflected in previous studies in

the 1980s and 1990s. Concentration levels in the urban population are no longer higher than those found among country dwellers. However, researchers did find a clear connection between lead concentration levels and tobacco use. Smokers have on average 3.6 $\mu\text{g/l}$ more in their blood than non-smokers. Lead is one of more than 4,000 poisonous substances that are found in tobacco. Lead is carcinogenic and long term exposure can cause damage to the brain, kidneys and the nervous system. Hobbies such as DIY electronics, ceramic painting or shooting can also significantly increase exposure to lead, although lead is disappearing from most materials. The study sounds a note of caution despite the positive results. Lead is an enduring element in the environment and the different sources of exposure have not been exactly quantified.

As the study could not clarify the role played by drinking water in contamination the Federal Health Office aims to return to this topic and study it in more depth. Subjects who drank only mineral water had slightly lower blood lead levels, although the study deemed this gap "statistically non-significant".

Drinking water sources in Switzerland are monitored and have negligible lead concentrations. Any contamination that does take place is caused by contact with materials and the longer the contact the stronger the contamination. Therefore it is recommended to let the first litre of water that comes out of the taps in the morning flow before using the water. As it has been sitting in the piping overnight it has concentrations above the safety threshold.

The authors of the study said it was difficult to know how much lower the lead concentration levels would go, without knowing the principal sources of exposure. *from swissinfo*