

## LIVESTOCK SECTOR IN EUROPE: THE POLITICAL STANDPOINT

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### **Introduction:**

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, livestock production in Europe is being faced with great challenges. This is due to the modified overall situation: on the one hand globalization is also progressing in this economic sector and the public demands on livestock production in Europe have also changed on the other hand. Both factors together generate stresses and strains so that extremely controversial debates are a foregone conclusion.

### **Initial situation:**

Since the 1950s, the farming sector has made considerable progress in terms of the quantity and quality of products. Speaking from the experience of an economy characterized by constant shortages during and after the Second World War, the primary objective was to ensure the provision of the population with sufficient food at reasonable prices. This has also been a key goal of the common agricultural policy in the European Community right from the outset.

As far as livestock production is concerned, the performance ability of the animals has peaked today: the genetic potential had improved, feeding as well as veterinary care was optimized and the husbandry methods streamlined.

At the same time, we can observe an increasingly critical stance of large parts of the public towards farm animal husbandry as it is customary today.

### **State of play in animal husbandry today:**

The enormous increase in productivity in livestock production has frequently caused problems relating to animal welfare and environmental conservation. A high stocking density with all the negative aspects that this involves, especially for the environment, can be found in lines of production that can be carried out off-land, first and foremost pig and poultry husbandry, to be specific. The efforts made in the Netherlands for many years now to achieve a cutback in nitrogen inputs by extensifying these lines of production are not coincidental.

This does not only impair the environment. The adaptability of the animals too is frequently overtaxed. This is less due to the large number of animals than to the frequently extremely barren housing environment that places a strain on pigs especially. For want of an alternative, the animals occupy themselves with their herd mates and become cannibals this way! Add to this that these animals are in an unstable health state that requires treatment with antibiotics-containing starter mixtures especially during the rearing period.

The price to be paid for the high productivity of the animals is mostly an impairment of the environment, animal welfare and animal health today. Over the past few years, these conditions became known to the general public because of various crises (BSE, FMD, avian

influenza, hormone residues in animal feed) and entailed an extremely critical attitude!

### **Productivity and competitiveness of livestock production**

All policy-makers who demand a change in the previous productivity gain strategy are accused of jeopardizing the competitiveness of German farming. This is all the more so as the ongoing WTO negotiations will result in a medium-term cutback in the protective measures for European production at the Community's external frontiers.

It's quite obvious that the competitive situation on the world market will engender accelerated structural changes in European livestock production. There will also be winners in the process, not only losers. Who these winners will be, is still unclear. If you analyze the previous trends in livestock production, you will note that farmers' incomes have actually tended downwards over the past decades despite all efforts to lower costs, and hence the competitiveness by international standards! The producers are caught in a spiral that points downwards. The animals clearly lose out at any rate because rationalization and mechanization are the decisive factors to increase productivity. This entails a barren environment, with the human care intensity diminishing in the face of ever larger and unstable livestock populations. This intensity of care is the key corrective factor whenever problems occur.

### **Options for future action**

If you analyze the environmental problems caused by intensive animal husbandry and consider the increasingly disapproving position of the population, a differentiated picture of future animal husbandry emerges. The specific locational conditions must also be taken into account in the process.

Attention must be paid to the internationally agreed minimum standards in the environmental field at any rate. These tend to put regions rich in livestock at a disadvantage because a curbing of the environmental strain through air pollution caused by livestock is most urgently required here.

Furthermore, the internationally agreed minimum standards in animal welfare must also be respected.

Both factors are influenced by the public acceptance of the respective type of husbandry in particular cases. Hence, the resistance put up by the local population results in the closure of newly established livestock farms in Germany today. This does not only concern mass livestock production, but also outdoor husbandry systems, for example.

Irrespective of the other framework conditions, we must succeed in reconciling the targets of animal health, animal welfare and environmental conservation in

livestock husbandry in Europe. I am convinced that solving this challenge is actually the prerequisite for making livestock farming in Europe viable in the future!

I am also convinced that we can overcome potential conflicts of aims and that these are not as huge in actual fact as it is always assumed. What matters, after all, is which compromises one is ready to make in the various fields. These goal conflicts become insurmountable when all above-mentioned targets are to be implemented without making concessions in productivity! Animal welfare will most likely lose out in these cases.

We urgently require differentiated solutions for animal husbandry in Europe. This means that each region must allow for its location-specific factors and take the internationally agreed minimum requirements as a starting point.

As I see it, these location-specific conditions also encompass the social acceptance of specific types of animal husbandry alongside the production-specific circumstances. It can be noted in the process that a society mainly shaped by urbanity tends to accept compromises in environmental and animal protection to a lesser degree than a society that is more entrenched in its agricultural roots.

A further factor is the regional distribution of people and farm animals: where livestock farms are located in the vicinity of non-agricultural settlements, conflicts arise between the interests of animal producers and those of the residents.

The measures taken to reconcile the aspects of animal health, animal welfare and environmental protection vary

from country to country: there are countries that bet on partnership and voluntariness (the Netherlands, United Kingdom and Denmark), while others set restrictive legal requirements (Germany, Austria). There are various gradations in between. Thus, mandatory requirements in the environmental field are frequently imposed first of all, with animal welfare being chosen as a restrictive factor only later on. Here, too, I wish to cite the Netherlands as an example.

Given all the existing differences, we can observe that Europe pursues the common aim of an animal-welfare oriented husbandry that is also eco-friendly. In this context, we cannot ensure our competitive capacity by just lowering the production costs to a maximum degree. I believe that a clearer differentiation of the markets will emerge in Europe in the future: alongside discount and organic food shops, other products will also draw customers. A wider range of production methods will therefore also evolve on the producer side: given a compliance with environmental and animal protection standards, some regions will due to other framework conditions (land and energy are cheap, low construction costs, favourable wage costs) achieve a kind of mass production that is also competitive on the world market, while other regions will focus on the production of so-called premium products to hold their ground on the market.

We are heading for exciting times marked by the recent agricultural reform. I very much hope that the animals will not again be made to suffer: we are all called upon to prevent this!