

Interview with president of the Swiss Farmers' Union Hansjörg Walter : "Sitting on my tractor relaxes me"

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad**

Band (Jahr): **37 (2010)**

Heft 2

PDF erstellt am: **22.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-906733>

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"Sitting on my tractor relaxes me"

Hansjörg Walter is a farmer, National Councillor and President of the Swiss Farmers' Union. Two years ago, he was almost elected to the Federal Council as Samuel Schmid's successor. He sees tough times ahead for farmers. The WTO and a possible free trade agreement on agriculture with the EU are making life difficult for them. They will also require state assistance in future. "There is not one agriculture industry in Europe that is not dependent on the state", stresses the President of the Swiss Farmers' Union. Interview by Heinz Eckert

"SWISS REVIEW": You have now been President of the Swiss Farmers' Union since 2001. How has Swiss farming changed during this period?

HANSJÖRG WALTER: It has been a turbulent decade for us Swiss farmers. We've been through two agricultural reforms and the number of farms has fallen by 20% to around 60,000 today. We have also achieved a great deal alongside these structural changes. Today, our production is more environmentally friendly, more animal friendly, more enterprising and more specialised.

Is international competition the main reason for the problems facing Swiss farming?

Yes, our borders are opening up more and more and we are finding ourselves increasingly exposed to fierce international competition. There are other major proposals on the horizon, such as the removal of customs duties, as called for by the WTO agreement. This would hit us very hard and would dramatically reduce the income of farming families.

Is there more structural change on the way? Will this mean a further decrease in the number of farms?

Yes, further structural change in agriculture is likely. The extent of this will depend on political developments and the general economic situation. If a lot of labour is required in the rest of the business world, the decline will be sharper. Over the next five years, the contraction may amount to 2% to 3% on average per year. If an agricultural free trade agreement is reached with the EU,



After obtaining a master craftsman's diploma in farming, 59-year-old Hans-jörg Walter took over his father's farm in Wängi, Thurgau, at the age of 34. Walter's farm currently has 32 hectares of land, of which 12 hectares are arable, with 36 dairy cattle, 57 fruit trees and two combine harvesters for contract work. Walter sat on Thurgau's Cantonal Council from 1992 to 1999, and has represented the Swiss People's Party (SVP) in the National Council since 1999. Hansjörg Walter has been President of the Swiss Farmers' Union since 2001. In December 2008, Walter was almost elected to national government as Federal Councillor Schmid's successor. He is married with two grown-up daughters and a son.

more farms will be forced to close. This agreement is hanging over Swiss farmers like the sword of Damocles. We will also see further developments within individual farms themselves, as they become even more specialised and streamline their operations.

What exactly would a free trade agreement on agriculture with the EU mean for farming in Switzerland?

We have had a completely liberalised cheese market with the EU since July 2007. We no longer have customs duties or import and export restrictions. The figures since then reveal a negative balance of trade. Cheese imports have increased by 8%, while exports have only risen by 2%. Cheese imported from the EU has mainly been used in food processing, for pizzas and as cooking cheese. Full liberalisation of trade in agricultural goods would put the entire Swiss farm-

ing industry at the same price level as the EU. But we have higher production costs than farmers in EU countries across all sectors.

What is the Federal Council proposing to do?

The Federal Council is trying to make an agreement of this kind palatable to us by offering support measures totalling several billion francs initially. But nobody yet knows how federal government intends to pay this amount or what specific measures will be taken to assist farms. The government would have to offer the Swiss agricultural industry enormous support to prevent farming dying out on a large scale. The trade and processing sectors have already made their

position clear.

Are you opposed to the EU then?

I am not opposed to the EU, but rather to the wholesale integration of an entire sector of business. This is not feasible as our costs will not fall in line with prices. I see nothing but disadvantages in such an agreement.

Does Switzerland actually need a farming industry?

In theory, the Swiss population, similar in size to that of a major European city at almost eight million, could easily be supplied with imported agricultural products. But this then raises the issue of who would be responsible for rural conservation and for preventing the land from becoming overgrown. You also have to consider that Swiss farming has a constitutional obligation to fulfil and the Swiss people want a certain level of ba-

sic provision of agricultural products. In light of increasing global starvation and limited resources, you also have to wonder how sensible it would be to abandon a functioning system of agricultural production. We would be completely at the mercy of global market conditions. These can change quickly as the sharp price rises in 2008 showed. We suddenly became very competitive.

There are continuously calls for farming to operate according to market economy principles. Would that be at all possible?

It could certainly operate according to market economy principles, but it could not be internationally competitive. Apart from New Zealand, there is no farming industry in the world that does not receive state subsidies and support. Farming in New Zealand benefits from exceptional structural and climatic conditions and cannot be compared with any other country. In comparison to other countries, at 58% Switzerland has a low level of self-sufficiency, making us a net importer of foodstuffs. In value terms, we rank at the top worldwide per capita.

How much does Swiss agriculture now cost the state each year in subsidies?

Today, we receive direct payments, which are for non-profit services provided. In total, we get CHF 3.2 billion per year. Direct payments account for CHF 2.5 billion of that, CHF 500 million goes towards measures to support the market and the remainder is investment support for construction in mountainous areas or interest-free, federal government loans. The fact that there are always lots of conditions attached to direct payments, in particular with regard to environmental protection, should not be overlooked. Provisions cover soil fertilisation, crop rotation, soil protection, the use of plant protection and a minimum quota of ecological compensation areas. Essentially, the type of farming doesn't matter; the support varies. The direct payments are compensation for services provided by farming families, such as rural conservation and the protection of natural resources. As they are linked to area, for example, and not to products, they do not distort the market.

But don't we still produce too much milk in Switzerland?

At the moment, yes. Switzerland was the first country in Europe to abolish milk quo-

tas a year ago in order to boost competitiveness. The price of milk has since been very low. To make up for the loss of income, farmers are producing more and, as a result, prices are falling further. It's a vicious circle. We are now trying to stabilise the market. We set up the Swiss Milk Sector Organisation for this purpose early last summer. There are currently still around 26,000 dairy farmers in Switzerland. There were twice as many 20 years ago. As farms have doubled their milk production output during this period, we are still producing as much milk as we were back then.

Should Swiss farmers perhaps diversify further and adapt their activities? What about agricultural tourism and farm shops?

There is no miracle solution in farming. It is much easier for farms close to larger urban areas to diversify than it is for those in remote areas. What is the point of flower nurseries and farm shops in areas where there are no customers? It is important that farms specialise more and no longer try to take on the full range of farming activities. Farmers have made great strides in recent years. Just look at how many farm shops there are now. You also find exotic animals, such as ostriches, buffaloes and lamas, as well as herb cultivation and other forms of speciality farming.

How good really is Swiss farming?

Our agricultural products meet the highest demands and are produced in line with the most rigorous ecological standards, including animal-friendly farming practices. Quality-conscious Swiss consumers appreciate that, although it is difficult to convince them that prices are reasonable. You constantly have to remind consumers that they spend much less on food today than they did 30 years ago. Spending on food has fallen from 30% of total household expenditure to just 7%

despite continual rises in the demands on production.

And how are Swiss farmers faring, generally speaking?

Swiss farmers are suffering as a result of constant reforms and are under great pressure owing to market liberalisation. However, it varies greatly depending on the size of the farm, how many family members are available to help out, where the farm is situated and the type of soil, etc. Some farms are doing well, while others are really struggling. The individual's wellbeing also depends on whether the workload is manageable, earnings are reasonable in comparison to being a salaried employee and whether the workload allows the farmer to have a social life and occasionally take a few days off or go on the odd trip. The average earnings for a farmer today stand at around CHF 40,000 a year, which is far less than the average in comparable industries.

How much farming do you still do?

I am one third politician, one third President of the Swiss Farmers' Union and one third farmer. Working on my farm keeps me balanced. Sitting on my tractor relaxes me. I am helped by my family, especially my wife, Madeleine, one employee and one apprentice.

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