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The last dairy farmer in the village

Swiss farmers are receiving an increasingly low price for their milk, which has major repercussions. Fewer and fewer farmers are keeping dairy cows, and if they do, they have ever larger herds. This is slowly changing the appearance of the Swiss countryside.



MARC LETTAU

Aekenmatt, a small hamlet on the edge of the Bernese alpine foothills, is how many people might imagine a typical Swiss farming village to look. Sizeable farms are found here on the undulating landscape. Splendid box-tree-lined farmers' gardens, burbling fountains and sun-beaten timber-framed buildings create the impression that little has changed here over the past two or three centuries. Except for when the commuter traffic runs through the village in the morning and evening tranquillity prevails. This impression is nevertheless deceiving. The

characteristic hamlet also typifies the far-reaching change that is commonplace in rural Switzerland. All the farms in Aekenmatt were dairy farming a generation ago. Every morning and evening, all the farming families would cart the fresh milk to the "Chäsi", the cheese dairy, in the centre of the village. It was made into Emmental in the neighbouring village.

But today 55-year-old Res Burren is the last dairy farmer in the village. He actually lives right next to the cheese dairy. However, the last time that milk from Aekenmatt was used for cheese production was in 1999. The

Aekenmatt once had lots of dairy farms. Today Res Burren is the last remaining dairy farmer in the village.

Photo: Adrian Moser

cheese dairy even ceased to be a milk collection point two years ago. A tanker comes to the village every two days to collect the milk from the village's last dairy farmer. Instead of travelling 20 metres to the cheese dairy, today it is transported 20 kilometres from the outset to a large-scale, industrial processing plant in the conurbation of Berne. The only rural thing about it is its address, which is 9 Milchstrasse (milk street).

Sharp drop from 100 to 50 cents

The village's only dairy farmer may also be its last. Burren is not sure

whether he will continue milking in future. He is faced with a fight for survival. When he was training it was drilled into him that average production costs in Switzerland stood at 70 cents per litre of milk. He later received government subsidised milk prices of 100 cents. Today he just gets around 50 cents. When analysing his business, he always comes to the same conclusion: "If I gave up the cows and just kept a few beef cattle, I would earn just as much as it involves far less expenditure."

The reasons for not – or not yet – giving up are unmissable on the farm built in 1833. Worn placards on the wall of the building document outstanding success as a breeder. In the sheds the names and dates neatly written on blackboards in white chalk point to an animal-loving nature. It is not abstract units of cattle found here, but instead Lolita, Naomi, Prag, Regula, Rosette, Ricola, Selina, Tamara, Tiffany and 11 other individuals with udders who have melodious-sounding names.

Rapid structural change

The hamlet of Aekenmatt is a reflection in extremis of what is happening throughout Switzerland. The number of farms supplying milk to dairies or cheese-making plants is continually declining. Of the 26,000 dairy farms recorded six years ago, 6,000 have now disappeared. In July 2016, the number of dairy cows stood at a record low of 550,000. Farmers whose milk ultimately ends up in shops are under severe pressure. Like Burren, they currently receive very poor prices. Dairy farmers whose produce is used for cheese-making are slightly better off. However, only around 40% of the milk is turned into cheese.

Burren revealed that it is not just falling earnings that concern him but also the uncertainty caused by short-term price fluctuations. While the

price of milk only goes up or down by a few cents from month to month, when applied to the 12,000 litres of milk that he delivers on average each month, this means significant fluctuations in income: "It would be like a workman finding out halfway through the month whether he is going to have 300 Swiss francs more or less in his pocket at the end of the month." A clear trend is evident when the overall picture is considered. The income generated on farms fell by 6.1% in Switzerland last year. The milk price is a key factor in this decline. It might seem that the problem could easily be resolved if farmers increased the size of the herds in their cowsheds. Burren nevertheless points out that this would require investment that would barely pay off owing to the poor milk prices.

More and more farms with small numbers of cows are therefore giving up dairy farming while the number of large farms with 100 cows or more has doubled within 10 years. On balance, only slightly less milk is being produced but under increasingly industrial conditions. Burren calls it a trend towards "factories" where automated milking robots handle entire herds. "But the introduction of robots means there is no longer a relationship with the animals," remarks the farmer from Aekenmatt.

The falling number of dairy cows and significant increase in the size of farms is gradually changing the appearance of rural Switzerland. "Lots of people have this notion that there will be a few cows grazing wherever you see lush green meadows in Switzerland," says Burren. But the picture is changing. You either no longer see any cows at all or large herds of them on semi-industrial farms. Jürg Jordi, spokesperson for the Federal Office for Agriculture, shares this view: "In Switzerland, as a country of pastureland, dairy farming is not just a key sector of production, it also contributes to

Radical change in Swiss farming

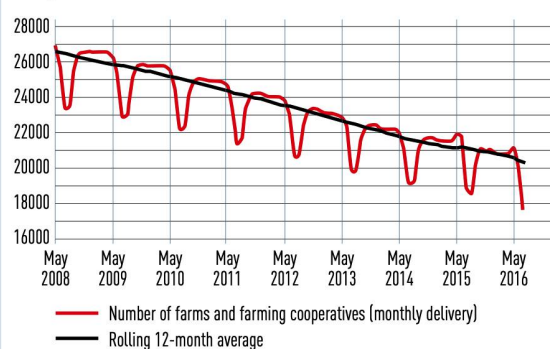
Swiss farming has been undergoing major structural change for years. "But that is certainly not just down to the milk price," remarks Jürg Jordi, spokesperson for the Federal Office for Agriculture. Technical progress and significant changes in general conditions have also played a huge role. The low milk price is nonetheless an additional and direct factor in driving change: farming incomes are falling, farmers are attempting to make up for declining prices by producing more milk which has led to the price falling further and spurred structural change on. "The current prices farmers receive for dairy milk are so low that they are jeopardising the survival of many dairy farms," explains Jordi. Guaranteeing production of Swiss milk is also at risk from a farming perspective. In other words, Swiss milk, which is quite simply part of the cultural heritage in terms of Swiss national identity, is finding itself under pressure.

The Swiss National Bank's decision on 15 January 2015 to unpeg the Swiss franc's exchange rate to the euro had huge ramifications, according to Reto Burkhardt from the umbrella organisation of Swiss dairy farmers, SMP: "This increased the price of Swiss cheese exports enormously. Exports were made difficult and import pressure grew. As a result, there was too much milk on the market in Switzerland in 2015 which drove prices down."

There is sustained pressure from the low price of milk in the EU. The SMP is nevertheless calling upon Swiss supermarket chains to put up the price of dairy products. This is the only way to ensure the farmers at the start of the value chain are paid better. Burkhardt believes this demand is a logical step. Switzerland has some of the tightest animal welfare legislation which it also implements. Swiss farmers do not use any genetically modified fodder, and dairy farming makes environmental sense in Switzerland – a country with much pastureland. These are "all criteria that consumers recognise".

The supermarket chains are at least willing to emphasise the "Swissness" of domestic dairy products more. Many of their products have carried a label since July that would have left people shaking their heads just a few years ago – "Swiss milk inside".

Dairy farmers



The curve shows a constant downward trend: Of the 26,000 dairy farms recorded in Switzerland six years ago, 6,000 have now disappeared. The large fluctuations are seasonal.

Graphic by SMP



the Swiss landscape.” He also confirms: “We are observing a trend towards larger farms.”

Swiss high-yield animals

The relationship between humans and animals is changing more quickly than the landscape: “Farmers with 200 cows cannot look after individual animals as well as those with 20 cows,” says Burren. However, the approach to cows as livestock is also changing in the smaller sheds as traditional farmers with small herds are trying to make up for the poor milk price with increasingly high-yield cows. Breeder organisations boast that more and more cows are now exceeding the “magic number of 100,000 kilograms in a lifetime” each year. In layman’s terms, there is an increasing number of cows on Swiss pastures which have already

Cows grazing on a luscious green meadow – an increasingly rare sight. Outdoors you either see no cows at all or large herds on semi-industrial farms.

Photo: Adrian Moser

supplied 100,000 litres of milk during their lifetime. The last dairy farmer in the village of Aekenmatt also sees himself as a traditionalist in this respect: “I am very much someone for whom increasing the milk yield is a target.” He supplies around a fifth more milk than his father Alfred did with the same number of cows in the shed. He is therefore pursuing a different approach to many younger Swiss farmers who no longer get subsidies for their produce but instead receive direct government payments, such as those for setting aside parts of the farm as environmental compensation areas which are used less intensively. This is also changing the landscape. Flower meadows with a diverse range of species between lush green high-yield meadows are an ever more common sight. Burren admits that he finds it hard to see himself as

a “manager of the landscape” rather than a productive farmer.

It is the turn of the letter “W” in the cowshed this year. This year’s calves will be given a name beginning with this letter. Waldi and Wiki have been on the meadow for some time. They have recently been joined by the calf named Wellness. Wellness? There could be no starker contrast between the name of the calf and the mood in farming. Burren smiles: “Perhaps Wellness will manage to cheer us up a bit.”

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