

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 49 (2022)
Heft: 4

Artikel: Initiative against intensive livestock farming sparks debate - even in the organic sector
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1051875>

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Initiative against intensive livestock farming sparks debate — even in the organic sector

Boasting support from the Franz Weber Foundation and Greenpeace, the initiative against intensive livestock farming is calling for the Bio Suisse criteria to become standard. Farmers are divided, including organic producers. A report from the Jura.

STÉPHANE HERZOG

Clouds are gathering on the horizon of Develier, a village located five kilometres from Delémont. Noël Saucy stands on the doorstep of his house. Offering his hand and a sincere smile, he gestures towards his home. The Saucy family has worked here for five generations. In 2002 they invested in a separate farming operation, located 200 metres further uphill, where we discover a four-metre-high shed with 180 square metres of floor space, inhabited by 2,000 laying hens. Nearby, Noël's wife, Agnès Saucy, checks and cleans the eggs moving past her on a conveyor belt. Each egg is dated and marked with a zero, a sign that it comes from a farm conforming to Bio Suisse standards. Between 1,600 and 1,900 eggs are laid here every day, before being sold on to a wholesaler for 47 cents each.

The Saucy family turned its back on conventional farming methods in 2002, as the village cheese dairy was about to switch over to organic. The transition took two years. Their farm already had 1,000 laying hens and by 2007 that number had increased to 3,000 over two buildings. An organic farm can keep a maximum of 4,000 hens, and a single coop is allowed half that number. In conventional farming, 18,000 laying hens may be kept in a single building, and 27,000 chickens for fattening can be kept together until they reach 28 days of age. “Organic farming is more demanding. We were proud to make a successful changeover. We're more aware now of certain elements as they relate to nature,” says Noël, whose products can be found on the shelves of Migros supermarkets. Nevertheless, this fact does not stop the 57-year-old from being opposed to the initiative against

intensive livestock farming, which will be put to the Swiss population in a referendum on 25 September. “If everyone goes organic, our products will no longer stand out,” he says, contrary to the views of Bio Suisse.

Animal feed and welfare at the centre of the debate

In Develier, the Saucy family's laying hens live in conditions that are very different from those of battery hens, which have been banned in Switzerland since 1992. The birds are able to move freely about in an aviary and lay their eggs in darkened nesting boxes. They peck around in a shed with a straw-strewn floor and have access to an outdoor area covered with wood chips. In good weather, they can flap around in a pasture and seek out shade under the spreading fruit

Among other demands, the initiative is calling for farm animals to be given sufficient living space and guaranteed animal-friendly husbandry. Here we see chickens on the Bio-Hof Saucy organic farm.

Photo: Stéphane Herzog

trees. The hens are productive for 11 months before they are slaughtered and replaced by 18-week-old pullets. On this farm, the free-range area for these hens must provide a minimum of five square metres of land per bird. Conventional poultry farming only requires half that space. At the Saucy farm, the feed they use is cultivated organically, and chicken manure is applied as fertiliser on site. “For the past 20 years, we've used absolutely no commercial fertiliser on our fields,” says the Jura native, whose farming operation also has 45 dairy cows. All of the fodder is produced right on the farm.

On the subject of animal feed, Alexandra Gavilano, a food specialist at Greenpeace, points out the considerable environmental burden that results from importing soya and cereal grains to feed animals. She regrets





that “import taxes on animal feed have been lowered since the war in Ukraine began”. The activist is calling on the Swiss population to reduce their consumption of meat, milk and eggs. The idea is that plants should be the primary source of nutrition for humans. The initiative also has a strong ethical component. “The concept of an animal’s dignity includes the right not to be intensively farmed,” argue supporters of the initiative. They point out that only 12 percent of farm animals have access to an outdoor pasture during their lifetime, and that up to 4 percent of farm animals die prematurely before they are taken to the abattoir.

When confronted with these figures, Noël puts them into perspective. “The farms with 18,000 chickens also provide winter runs and pastures,” he says. But isn’t the whole point of the

A stamp that certifies animal wellbeing. The code 0-CH-BIO designates eggs from farms that meet the Bio-Suisse criteria.

Photo: Stéphane Herzog

Conventional farms are allowed to keep up to 18,000 chickens per shed. Animal rights activists are campaigning against this high density and its consequences for animal welfare. Here we see a poultry farm in Daillens (VD).

Photo: Keystone

initiative to enable the federal government to protect Swiss agriculture? Paradoxically, Noël fears for his business. “If production declines because the number of hens per farm is shrinking, we’ll be competing with foreign poultry, which are raised under much worse conditions than in Switzerland.” In the European Union, for example, chicken farms can house up to 100,000 birds. Noël foresees problems in trying to expand the construction of small organic farms, despite owning one himself. On the other hand, however, the initiative backers believe that such farms would be favourable to animal welfare.

A sense of loyalty at play among farmers

If the initiative is approved, around 5 percent of Swiss farms would be forced to change their farming methods. Greenpeace reports that 237 farms have more than 12,000 hens, accounting for 43 percent of the total poultry stock in Switzerland. Why, then, are some organic farmers fighting the initiative? Christine Gerber, a

farmer from the Jura region, is a member of the Uniterre organisation and has her own views on this matter. “Male farmers are caught up in a system of loyalty to their peers and are influenced by their education, whereas we women bear the children. We have a responsibility to the future generations,” she declares. Her farm in the Franche-Montagnes district is a unique neo-agricultural enclave, where meat is eaten only twice a week.

Christine is in favour of reducing the scale of poultry and pig production. She opposes plans to increase milk production. “More cows means even more manure. The land is already overloaded with it,” she says. Faced with a drought situation, the farmer would consider reducing her herd. She emphasises the generous time period outlined by the initiative – 25 years – to organise a transition to organic farming. “There will be more small farms, which is a positive thing,” she adds, hopefully.

Act now before feed shortages occur

According to Greenpeace, the transition will happen sooner rather than later due to grain and fodder shortages in an environment already under pressure. “We need to help farmers who are dependent on this production system and on major distributors,” says Alexandra Gavilano. She believes that the approval of the initiative would “provide a political basis for the creation of a fund to support the transformation of agriculture”. The Federal Council proposed a direct counter-proposal to this initiative that instead would have required all livestock to have regular outdoor exercise. The National Council, however, did not agree to the proposal.

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