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Dutch Livestockmen Face Environmental Challenges

by Cline J. Warren
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Maintaining a thriving livestock economy in close concert with one of the world's highest population densities poses a serious environmental challenge to the Netherlands. Recently, the Dutch have stepped up their efforts to combat pollution - and some of the techniques have wide application on farms in other countries, which increasingly face similar problems.

Worldwide environmental concerns are expected to have a growing impact on output of farm products, as well as other resources. In the United States, for example, many livestock producers and food processors face added investment as a result of new amendments to the 1972 Federal Water Pollution Act. More and more, the cost of resolving environmental problems will affect both producer and consumer.

The Dutch traditionally have had a high commitment to ecology. Now, because of up-trending livestock numbers, population growth, and industrial expansion, the commitment is being intensified. Among present efforts is the use of manure banks partly paid for by the Government. National guidelines to control pollution have been established, to be carried out at the local level. Proposals for faster decisions and uniform environmental standards are being considered.

The Netherlands is a small country with an area of 14,140 square miles - about the size of Maryland and Delaware. The magnitude of the solid waste disposal problem in the livestock sector alone is illustrated by the country's annual livestock population numbers

of 4.5 million cows, 10 million hogs, 300 million broilers, 5 million turkeys, and 25 million layers.

Moreover, during the last two decades, Holland's livestock numbers have grown at an average annual rate of 4.2 percent. This growth is expected to continue, possibly at a slower pace, and there is a growing awareness that present and future expansion must be coordinated with measures for pollution control.

Along with growing animal numbers, the Netherlands has a human population density of close to 1,050 persons per square mile - one of the highest in the world. In 1973, population totaled some 13.4 million persons.

When waste from livestock production is considered along with that from livestock processing plants, however, the country reportedly has a volume of solid waste for disposal equivalent to that of a human population of 35 to 40 million.

Problems of solid waste disposal at the farm level are confined mainly to Dutch farms producing pork, veal, and broilers. These types of livestock have shown the most rapid pace of growth and produce stable manure at a faster rate than can be efficiently utilized on the

available crop surface in the immediate vicinity.

As recently as 1967, waste cleaned from broiler and turkey houses was roughly valued at 0.1 cents per bird. Now, growers reportedly can only dispose of this litter by making it available to neighboring crop farmers free or by paying a fee to have it removed.

An increasing number of pork and veal producers face similar problems. The situation is most acute in the Provinces of North Brabant, Limburg, and Gelderland. But the problem is more one of distribution than of surplus.

To cope with the mountain of waste that is now created on Dutch farms in the main livestock areas, farm groups have set up manure banks in each of these three Provinces. These banks act as intermediaries between livestock producers with an oversupply of manure and farmers with a need for fertilizer.

The creation of more manure banks is being promoted by the Agricultural Development and Reorganization Fund with strong support from the Minister of Public Health and Environment. The manure banks are foundations; their operating

costs are partly borne by the Government. Various agricultural organizations have members on the managing board of each bank.

Transportation of the manure is contracted with private firms that use specially designed tank cars and costs are normally paid by the receiver. Transportation costs in 1973-74 averaged about 6 guilders (\$2.40) per metric ton. If the manure must be hauled more than 5 miles, the recipient can qualify for a Government subsidy of 3 guilders per ton.

A major problem in the manure-bank concept is the imbalance between supply and demand. Although the supply of manure is rather constant throughout the year, demand is concentrated in the fall and the spring.

This problem is being solved by an open-pit storage system. Since manure receivers generally lack storage facilities, the manure banks have designed an open-pit manure storage system for which they supply a seamless polyethylene liner without charge. Plans are also underway for the construction of regional storage facilities.

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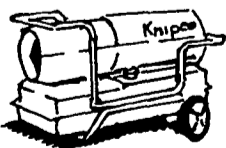
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