

Voluntary Report – Voluntary - Public Distribution

Date: June 17,2020

Report Number: NL2020-0029

Report Name: Advisory Council Critical of Government Approach to Reduce Nitrogen Emissions

Country: Netherlands

Post: The Hague

Report Category: Agricultural Situation, Agriculture in the News, Livestock and Products

Prepared By: Marjolein Selten & Bob Flach

Approved By: Christopher Riker

Report Highlights:

In 2019, the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality commissioned an external body to propose a number of short- and long-term solutions in an attempt to solve the ongoing nitrogen crisis in the Netherlands. The decision was taken after the highest court in the Netherlands decided that the government's plans for construction were inconsistent with EU legislation on the protection of wild flora and fauna. In June 2020, the Advisory Council released its final recommendations to reduce nitrogen emissions. In its report, the Advisory Council is critical of the government's efforts to date, and argues that the government's plans are not sufficiently ambitious.

Background

In May 2019, the highest court in the Netherlands ruled that the Dutch government had granted construction permits in violation of the European Council directive on the conservation of natural habitats for wild flora and fauna. Subsequently, the government commissioned an external body (known as the Advisory Council), under the leadership of Johan Remkes (a former Deputy Prime Minister of the Netherlands), to advise the cabinet on both short- and long-term solutions to address the nitrogen problem.¹ The Advisory Council published its first report at the end of September 2019,² and its final report in June 2020.³

In its September 2019 report, the Advisory Council recommended the government find ways to reduce the livestock herd in the Netherlands (including looking at ways to buyout farmers that are operating livestock enterprises near natural areas, while encouraging other farms to install additional emissions-control measures). Subsequently, the Ministry of Agriculture announced a number of measures that would help reduce agricultural emissions. One of them, the introduction of a €180 million (\$202 million) buyout scheme for swine farmers, compensates Dutch swine farmers who wish to vacate the industry. However, when registration for the scheme opened in January 2020, more farmers registered to end their businesses than the amount of money could accommodate.

The government also launched a €5 billion (\$5.6 billion) support program to finance investments focused on nature restoration and encouraging farmers, industry, aviation, and shipping to reduce their emissions. A significant part of the fund, €1.8 billion (\$2 billion), will be allocated to agriculture to buyout farmers that work close to nitrogen-sensitive nature areas, as well as encouraging farmers to green their farms. For additional information, see [NL2020-0012: Dutch Government Announces Programs to Curb Nitrogen Emissions](#).

Advisory Council Report

According to the Advisory Council's final report issued last week, the government's plan to reduce nitrogen-based pollution is unambitious and "there is insufficient evidence that it will allow nature to fully recover." In particular, the committee found that the government's target of a 26 percent emissions cut by 2030 does not go far enough. The reduction, according to the Advisory Council, should be at least 50 percent -- and should be legally binding as well.

Remkes said the government's proposal to buyout farmers who want to end production would not be enough to reduce emissions, particularly on livestock farms close to environmentally sensitive areas. "Farming must make the biggest effort because it is responsible for 40 percent of nitrogen emissions in the form of ammonia," he said.⁴ Remkes advocates for "low-emission agriculture" using less fertilizer. He further sees little potential in the (voluntary) buyout of random farmers, and argues the program only makes sense for companies with high nitrogen emissions near nature reserves.

¹ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/actueel/nieuws/2019/07/12/remkes-voorzitter-adviescollege-stikstofproblematiek>

² https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/binaries/rijksoverheid/documenten/rapporten/2019/09/25/eerste-advies-adviescollege-stikstofproblematiek/Niet_alles_kan_Eerste_advies_Adviescollege_Stikstofproblematiek.pdf

³ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/binaries/rijksoverheid/documenten/rapporten/2020/06/08/niet-alles-kan-overal/niet+alles+kan+overal.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.trouw.nl/duurzaamheid-natuur/johan-remkes-de-uitstoot-van-stikstof-moet-drastisch-omlaag~b7cd5681/>

Reaction to the Advisory Council's Final Report

The Dutch Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality, Carola Schouten, said she would read the “strong advice” in the report. “We are learning more and more on how to do things,” she said, adding that there are no easy solutions.⁵

Some industry reactions to Remkes’ proposal are predictably more critical. Geesje Rotgers, of the Agricultural Mesdag Fund,⁶ noted, “{t}hat goal (50 percent) is utterly unattainable.” “The nitrogen that blows in from the North Sea and abroad already causes excessive exceedances in one-third of all [Natura 2000](#) areas.⁷ Then, the rest of the Netherlands is not allowed to emit anything at all. This is wishful thinking.”⁸

The Dutch Organization for Agriculture and Horticulture (known in Dutch as the Land- en Tuinbouw Organisatie Nederland or LTO) also commented that Remkes’ recommendations are problematic. “The Netherlands, as a small, densely populated and industrious country with many unattainable nature goals, has walked into a dead-end tunnel,” says Trienke Elshof of LTO.⁹ According to her, the fundamental question is “do we want a realistic balance between living, working, agriculture, and nature, and are we prepared to invest in that?”¹⁰

Government Expands Swine Buyout Program

Meanwhile, Minister Schouten opted to increase the size of the aforementioned €180 million (\$202 million) buyout scheme for swine farmers by €275 million (\$309 million) -- bringing the total size of the fund to €455 million (\$511 million). The increased funding enables the Ministry to honor all 407 applications that meet the requirements of the scheme. Consequently, all pig farmers who have registered and meet the requirements will be compensated (resulting in a total of 910,645 pig rights being withdrawn from the market).

If all of these rights represented actual hogs taken out of the market, the Dutch swine herd would decrease by an estimated eight percent.¹¹ FAS/The Hague, however, expects that the effect of these farmers leaving the market will be less severe. It is anticipated that there will only be a slight reduction in pork production in the Netherlands because less piglets and hogs will be exported to Germany (meaning a higher proportion of Dutch hogs will be fattened and slaughtered domestically).

Attachments:

No Attachments.

⁵ <https://nos.nl/artikel/2336574-commissie-kraakt-nieuwe-stikstofaanpak-kabinet.html>

⁶ Post Note: The Mesdag Fund is sponsored by Dutch dairy organizations and developed its own calculations for nitrogen deposits in the Netherlands. While its initial findings showed nitrogen deposits from agriculture to be much lower than the government calculations, its end-results were similar to the calculations made by the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment.

⁷ Post Note: The Natura 2000 Network, which stretches across more than 18 percent of the European Union’s (EU’s) land mass, is an EU-wide scheme meant to protect natural areas.

⁸ <https://www.telegraaf.nl/nieuws/1698250015/zelfs-een-leeg-land-geeft-nog-te-veel-stikstof>

⁹ <https://www.lto.nl/advies-remkes-gaat-voorbij-aan-onmogelijkheid-stikstofdoelstellingen/>

¹⁰ [Id.](#)

¹¹ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/binaries/rijksoverheid/documenten/kamerstukken/2020/06/10/stand-van-zaken-subsidieregeling-sanering-varkenshouderijen-srv/Stand+van+zaken+Subsidieregeling+sanering+varkenshouderijen+%28Srv%29.pdf>