

Voluntary Report – Voluntary - Public Distribution

Date: August 27,2020

Report Number: NL2020-0041

Report Name: Dutch Ministry Abandons Controversial Feed Measure to Limit Nitrogen Emissions

Country: Netherlands

Post: The Hague

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

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Report Highlights:

A proposal by the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food Quality to limit the addition of proteins in feed concentrates for dairy cattle in an effort to reduce Dutch nitrogen emissions led to strong opposition from the farm sector. In May 2020, Dutch Agriculture Minister Schouten announced that she intended to temporarily limit the use of proteins in feed as of September 1 (until the end of 2020) in order to attain a reduction of 0.2 kilotons in nitrogen emissions. Through this measure, the Ministry hoped to create space for the construction of 75,000 new homes this year (which also generates emissions). In the end, however, the Ministry elected to scrap the feed measure due to a recent period of drought in the Netherlands. Research from Wageningen University indicated that the feed measure would not have successfully reduced nitrogen emissions as more protein would need to be added to cows' diets in order to make up for lower levels of protein in grass and ensure animal health.

Background

The Netherlands is home to 16,260 dairy farms whose inventories total 1.6 million dairy cows and calves.¹ Combined, the dairy farms maintain 1.1 million hectares of grassland, equivalent to 28 percent of the Dutch land surface.² The volume of milk that an average cow produces has increased significantly over time -- from 6,000 liters 35 years ago to 9,000 liters per year now. Increasing per-cow milk production was largely made possible by adjusting cows' diets.³

In recent years, farmers have been providing greater volumes of feed concentrate to their animals. Currently, feed concentrate accounts for roughly one-quarter to one-third of a cow's diet in the Netherlands. The rest of the feed is composed of roughage (e.g., grass, grass silage, hay, and maize). However, there is a strong correlation between the protein content in feed and the emission of ammonia.⁴

The feed measure was one of the measures put forward by an external advisory committee that was tasked last year by the Ministry of Agriculture to look for ways to reduce nitrogen-based pollution in the Netherlands after the highest court in the country (known as the Council of State) ruled that the government had to reduce emissions in order to meet its climate goals. For additional information, see [NL2020-0029: Advisory Council Critical of Government Approach to Reduce Nitrogen Emissions](#). Agriculture was identified as a major source of nitrogen emissions,⁵ and by (temporarily) reducing the amount of crude protein in feed, the government hoped to create room to give a green light for the construction of 75,000 houses to help combat a severe housing shortage (an activity which also generates nitrogen emissions).

Ministry Proposes to Limit Crude Protein Levels in Dairy Cattle Feed

According to figures from Statistics Netherlands, the entire livestock sector in the Netherlands emitted 490 kilotons of nitrogen last year, of which 280 kilotons can be attributed to dairy farming.⁶ With the feed measure, the Dutch government intended to set an average limit of 155 grams of dry matter (crude protein) in dairy cattle feed, through which it aimed to achieve a 1.2 mol reduction in nitrogen deposits per hectare, per year. The Ministry noted that the current national level of dry matter in dairy cattle feed averages 165 grams.⁷ Accordingly, the Ministry aimed to decrease the crude protein content added to a dairy cow's diet by 6.1 percent. In turn, the Ministry expected to realize a 0.5 percent reduction in nitrogen emissions (equivalent to 0.2 kilotons of nitrogen).⁸

¹ Central Statistics Bureau: <https://opendata.cbs.nl/#/CBS/nl/dataset/80780ned/table>

² <https://www.agrimatie.nl/SectorResultaat.aspx?subpubID=2232§orID=2245&themaID=3577>

³ <https://decorrespondent.nl/11426/koeien-worden-ziek-zonder-krachtvoer-zeggen-boeren-maar-wacht-eens-koeien-aten-toch-gras/915444035880-246831b9>

⁴ <https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/nieuws/nederland/artikel/5169252/veevoer-eiwit-boeren-protest-waarom-minister-regel-expert-stikstof>

⁵ Agriculture was found to be responsible for 41 percent of nitrogen emissions in the Netherlands. See <https://nos.nl/artikel/2329170-mesdagfonds-komt-nu-toch-uit-op-zelfde-stikstofcijfer-als-rivm-trekt-kritiek-stil-in.html>

⁶ <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2020/05/minder-vee-zorgt-voor-minder-stikstof-en-fosfaat-in-mest>

⁷ <https://www.aanpakstikstof.nl/binaries/aanpakstikstof/documenten/publicaties/2020/05/06/bijlage-kamerbrief-06-mei-2020/bijlage+6+mei+2020+-+veevoermaatregel.pdf>

⁸ This represents one hundredth of the required decrease. According to European rules, Dutch nitrogen emissions must be reduced by 50 percent to no longer cause additional damage to nature.

The maximum level of crude protein permissible for dairy cattle feed would be differentiated according to farm intensity and soil type. The Ministry proposed to work with a matrix of three different soil types (i.e., sand, clay, and peat) and three types of business operations (i.e., less intensive, intensive, and very intensive). The maximum amount of crude protein a farmer could feed his animals would then be defined by which combination the farmer fit.⁹

For example, the proposed standard was a maximum of 164 grams of crude protein per kilo of feed for farms on peat soil, 172 grams on clay, and 192 grams on sand for farms with an 'average' production intensity of 14,000 to 20,000 kilos of milk per hectare. More intensive farms (i.e., > 20,000 kilos of milk per hectare) on all soil types would be permitted to add one additional gram of protein to the standard. Whereas less intensive dairy farm businesses (with a production level below 14,000 kilos of milk per hectare), situated on sand or clay, would have to comply with a standard that was one gram lower.¹⁰ Dairy farmers who do not meet the standards could risk a fine.

The Dutch Agriculture Minister claimed that the proposed feed measure would have no effect on milk production or quality, as well as no effect on animal health. Several animal experts, however, disputed this and argued that if the amount of protein in the feed concentrate were to be reduced, some animals may not receive sufficient protein¹¹ -- a problem for cows because the animals need sufficient levels of protein to remain healthy and deliver sufficient volumes of milk. Calves, moreover, also need protein to grow and develop. Veterinary researchers from the University of Utrecht concluded that "...animal health risks have been made subordinate to the enforceability of the regulations." Some researchers further argued that "it is possible to prepare rations with a lower protein content, but the problem is, due to the need to ensure enforceability, that the regulation does not focus on the total ration, but just on feed concentrates."¹²

Government's Feed Measure Receives Widespread Criticism

The feed measure provoked resistance from various parts of the sector. Dairy farmers regarded the compulsory 'protein diet' as an impairment to their skills, noting that they should be able to determine what to feed their animals as opposed to having to follow government guidelines. The farmers, supported by several veterinarians, also pointed to risks for animal health -- arguing that maximizing the protein content in concentrates would make it impossible to adjust the feed to ensure the health of individual cows, when necessary.

According to Jan Willem Erisman of the [Louis Bolk Institute](#), the frustration among farmers was "mainly the result of the uncertainty that farmers are facing at this moment. Farmers lack a long-term perspective. A dark cloud hangs in the air, but farmers don't know what type of rain will fall down on them."¹³ Erisman commented that more than fifteen months after the nitrogen decision by the Council of State was taken, the Dutch Cabinet had not yet succeeded in presenting structural solutions to the nitrogen problem. Due to slow political decision-making, he noted there is "enormous pressure on the

⁹ <https://fd.nl/achtergrond/1351075/een-minister-die-zich-met-het-voer-van-de-koeien-bemoeit-dat-gaat-boeren-en-milieuactivisten-te-ver>

¹⁰ <https://www.boerderij.nl/Rundveehouderij/Achtergrond/2020/7/Minder-eiwit-in-veevoer-dit-zijn-de-plannen-615346E/>

¹¹ <https://www.nu.nl/binnenland/6062709/waarom-boeren-boos-zijn-over-de-voermaatregel-van-minister-schouten.html>

¹² <https://www.uu.nl/nieuws/eiwitmaatregel-gaat-ten-koste-van-diergezondheid-en-productie>

¹³ <https://fd.nl/achtergrond/1351075/een-minister-die-zich-met-het-voer-van-de-koeien-bemoeit-dat-gaat-boeren-en-milieuactivisten-te-ver>

short term,” to grant permits for construction. He argued the feed measure was one of the few measures that could be taken quickly and which would be legally enforceable, “but such an intervention in the entrepreneurship of the farmer can only be done by politicians in harmonious consultation with the sector.”¹⁴

The Netherlands Agricultural and Horticultural organization (known by its Dutch acronym of LTO) argued that the proposed feed measure put pressure on farmers and was being done to create “space” for other sectors (e.g., the construction sector). LTO expressed disappointment that the government and agricultural sector were not able to come to a mutually agreeable solution. Similarly, the Dutch Dairy Association (known by its Dutch acronym of NZO) noted that the feed measure proposed a generic prescription while taking insufficient account of company-specific circumstances. It noted that future-proof agriculture requires long-term goals and accompanying regulations. Chairman Henk Flipsen of Nevedi, the branch organization for the feed industry, commented that “{w}e have been mentioning for some time that lowering the protein content in feed concentrates is not effective and sensible, but it is a choice that the Minister still wants to take anyway.”¹⁵

Dairy Sector Proposes an Alternative Feed Measure

Subsequently, the Dutch dairy sector decided to develop its own proposal to reduce nitrogen emissions at the farm level. The sector’s plan (endorsed by multiple sector organizations)¹⁶ focused on the total protein consumption per farm, for which it aimed to achieve a three percent reduction. The sector suggested this reduction be calculated based on the amount of protein that a farmer had fed his animals during the second half of calendar year 2018.

In contrast to the Ministry’s plan, and under the sector’s proposal, livestock farmers would still be permitted to provide protein-rich feeds to their animals, enabling farmers to modify feed for vulnerable cattle, if needed. The sector argued this was particularly important for feed rations using a relatively large amount of maize because, in these instances, a protein correction is necessary with a concentrated feed such as soybean meal or rapeseed meal. In the Ministry’s plan, these supplementary feeds may be supplied via mixtures, but only if the protein content of those mixtures remains below the proposed limits.

However, Minister Schouten noted that the sector’s proposal would be impracticable since it would require each farm to draw up an individualized plan that would then have to be approved and reviewed (adding that this would take time that the Ministry did not feel it had because it wanted to support the timely resumption of construction). Consequently, the Minister decided to dismiss the sector’s plan.

Dutch Parliament Demands an External Assessment

Following the dismissal of the sector’s proposal, some Parliamentary Ministers from the government coalition (Prime Minister Rutte’s People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy {known as VVD} and the Christian Democratic Appeal party {known as CDA}) directed the Minister to have the sector’s proposal evaluated by the Dutch Environmental Assessment Agency (known by its Dutch acronym of

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ <https://www.foodagribusiness.nl/lto-en-nevedi-negatief-over-begrenzing-eiwitgehalte/>

¹⁶ The sector plan was drawn up by farmers organization Agractie, the Dutch Dairywomen Board (DDB), land-based dairy cattle farmer organization Netwerk Grondig, LTO, young farmers organization NAJK, Dutch Dairy Farmers Union (NMV), and the animal feed sector, united in Nevedi

PBL). As a result, PBL was asked to study three distinct proposals: the proposal from the Ministry, the sector's proposal, and a combination of both.

LTO initially reacted favorably to the idea, but later said it would “only be happy” if the sector's plan was adopted. Meanwhile, the Dutch farmers action group, known as the Farmers Defense Force (FDF), organized several protests up and down the country, resulting in farmers blocking roads and distribution centers with their tractors. They also interrupted a visit by the Minister to the province of Zeeland which had to conclude earlier than planned.

Minister Decides to Scrap the Livestock Feed Measure

In late August 2020, LTO issued a final call to Minister Schouten to scrap the temporary feed measure.¹⁷ In a letter to the Minister, the LTO reiterated that the measure to limit the protein content in feed concentrates is unworkable, noting that the recent period of drought in the Netherlands has exacerbated concerns about the feasibility of the proposed measure. The LTO noted that farmers are willing to take steps to further reduce nitrogen deposition, but, not at any cost.

That same week, researchers from Wageningen University indicated that this year's precipitation deficit has led to a shortage of fresh, protein-rich pasture grass across the Netherlands, one of the most important components of a cow's diet. Now that cows are getting less protein from eating grass, the protein content in concentrates must be increased in order not to endanger the health of the cows. The effect of the Ministry's feed measure would therefore be nullified. As a result, Minister Schouten announced she would no longer pursue the implementation of the Ministry's proposal.¹⁸

In response, the LTO said it is ready “to hang up the garlands,” and a few hundred farmers with tractors subsequently came together at a pasture in the province of Gelderland to celebrate the feed measure being dropped by the Ministry. In addition, on August 21, PBL published the results of its assessment of the Ministry's proposed measure. According to PBL, the feed measures that have been proposed by the Ministry and the sector are surrounded by too many uncertainties. As a result, PBL questioned whether the intended nitrogen reduction could be achieved through either proposal.¹⁹

What's next?

To allow for the construction of houses and roads to continue this year, the Dutch Cabinet has indicated it would like to use part of the nitrogen gains from another measure: the voluntary buy-out scheme for swine farmers. For additional information on this scheme, see [NL2020-0012: Dutch Government Announces Programs to Curb Nitrogen Emissions](#).

Farmers who want to exit farming have the option to apply for the scheme and be bought out by the government. The scheme was initially designed to combat odor nuisance, but effectively also results in nitrogen reductions. The exact benefits in terms of nitrogen gains from the buy-out scheme for swine farmers are, at this moment, still unknown, but are expected to be known in the spring of 2021. Minister Schouten commented that “{t}his means that the proposed nitrogen space will become available a little

¹⁷ <https://www.lto.nl/lto-doet-ultieme-oproep-om-voermaatregel-te-schrappen/>

¹⁸ <https://fd.nl/economie-politiek/1354608/landbouwminister-schouten-schrapt-omstreden-veevoermaatregel>

¹⁹ <https://www.nieuweoogst.nl/nieuws/2020/08/21/pbl-voermaatregelen-bevatten-te-veel-onzekerheden>. For the PBL publication, see: <https://www.pbl.nl/sites/default/files/downloads/pbl-2020-stikstofreductie-via-krachtvoer-4243.pdf>

later, but given the turnaround time for construction permit applications and other procedures, this is not expected to be an obstacle for construction to continue as planned.”²⁰

Attachments:

No Attachments.

²⁰ <https://nos.nl/artikel/2344673-schouten-bevestigt-veevoermaatregel-geschrap-te-weinig-eiwit-in-gras.html>