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What Can We Learn from Danish Farmers?

by Palle Pedersen

During the past 100 years, Danish agriculture has developed its position and ability to compete on international markets. Since Denmark joined the European Economic Community in 1973, productivity in Danish agriculture has increased considerably; and, with a food production sufficient for 15 million people and a population of only 5.2 million, Denmark exports two-thirds of its agricultural production to more than 180 countries. Overall, Denmark is the largest food exporter in the world relative to its population.¹

Individual farms in Denmark have undergone rigorous change in structure toward greater and more specialized units. Manufacturing plants in the meat and dairy sectors are among the most modern and effective in Europe. This progression has been made possible by the agricultural-industrial sector, continually addressing the needs of farmers and companies for technology and auxiliaries.

Denmark's agricultural law serves as a constitution for farmers. The purpose of the law is to protect fulltime-based farming and maintain soil quality, as well as to impose regulations ensuring that cultivation, ownership, tenancy, the environment, and other aspects are all managed in the best possible way. Normally, farms are acquired through a sale. In order to buy a farm larger than 75 acres, the farmer is required to have undergone five years of formal training—theory and practice—preparing him for responsible management. Given that Danish environmental regulations require a harmonious relationship between the number of animals and the acreage of a production unit, very large farms do not exist. Specific legislation and approval procedures for farms with a large animal production seek to avoid industrialization of the farming sector.

Danish agriculture has been on the forefront of agricultural development and productivity in Europe. The bulk of agricultural profits in Denmark come from animal production, with a total of 64 percent of gross earnings in Danish farming, taken as a whole. The

most predominant crop is small grain, covering 60% of the farmland. Winter wheat and spring barley are the most important crops. During the 1980s, winter crops were increasingly cultivated, in part due to Danish environmental legislation that obliges farmers to cultivate at least 65% of farmland during the winter season in order to reduce nitrogen leaching. Canola, sugar beets, grass seed, potatoes, corn, and various specialized crops also are grown. Denmark is the largest grass seed producer in Europe and the largest exporter of grass seed and clover seed in the world.

The large amount of grain produced is primarily used in hog production. Denmark is the largest pork exporter in the world; 23 million pigs are produced in Denmark each year, three-quarters of these for export. This amount constitutes 7 percent of Denmark's total annual exports.

In Denmark, the public, the authorities, the farmers, and the media all are interested in issues related to the environment. This debate has not decreased in recent years. There is an ongoing dialogue between politicians and farmers on the environment, the latter striving for the highest possible degree of openness to production methods. When new environmental initiatives are evaluated, the discussion between farmers and politicians often focuses on the costs involved in implementing these measures, and how agriculture will be able to sustain its international competitiveness. In Denmark, the law determines many environmental regulations concerning agriculture.

The common agricultural policy of the EU (European Union) is faced with great challenges that will lead to new reforms in years to come. This is mainly due to the World Trade Organization negotiations and the enlarged participation of the Eastern European countries. Despite the above issues, the economy has been good for the farmers because they receive subsidies from the EU. After the introduction of the East European countries into the EU, however, the subsidy program will be changed.² The problem for Danish farmers is that their production costs are getting so high that it will be very difficult for them to stay competitive in the future. New production systems are therefore underway. Farmers in the United States may be able to learn from the Danish farmers because U.S.

farmers also face a lot of competition, not so much from Eastern Europe, but from South America.

¹ This and other information about Denmark and Danish agriculture can be found at < www.agriculture.dk > and < www.landbrugsraadet.dk >.

² Danish Agricultural Council. 2006. The position of Danish agriculture on the future agricultural policy of the European Union, <<http://www.landbrugsraadet.dk/view.asp?ID=760>>.