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AGRICULTURE: Inflation nibbles away at farm earnings

Three percent less in 1979, seven percent less in 1980 and two percent less in 1981; the average income of farmers in the European Community has registered significant declines over the past three years after a long period of uninterrupted increases.

But changes in farm revenues always varied considerably from one country to the next. As a result, in 1981 increases remained above their 1973-1975 level in Greece, Denmark, the Netherlands and Italy, whilst in Ireland, Luxembourg, the United Kingdom, the Federal Republic of Germany and France they fell.

This decline in half of the Community member countries has been worrying EEC officials because it goes against one of the main Community objectives - to maintain farmers living standards through raising their incomes.

In November 1981, Community Heads of State and Government asked the European Commission to study the specific problem of the impact of inflation on farmers incomes. The Commission has just published its conclusions. They show that, while inflation has increased at widely differing rates in different member states (5.8 percent in Germany to 24.1 percent in Greece in 1981) farm revenues have simply not kept up. This is explained by the fact that the proportion of paid workers in the farm labour force is not the same in each European country. It is above 50 percent in the United Kingdom, but is less than 10 percent in Greece and Luxembourg. For non-salaried farmworkers, that is the owners of farms and their families, changes in income depend to a large degree on a number of factors such as production costs, national currency exchange rates and climatic conditions. The most important factor remains the support prices set by the European Community which are negotiated each year by Community Agriculture Ministers. The process of fixing agricultural prices is currently underway for the coming season. The main question is whether Farm ministers will decide to improve the purchasing power lost by farmers over the last three years or opt for placing the emphasis on fighting inflation.

FINANCES: Did someone say "social security"?

Social security without a doubt has become one of the main gains of labour since the industrial revolution. Little by little it has been extended to the sectors of health, maternity, accidents at work, sickness, old age, unemployment and family benefits. It has become an infallible insurance against the major mishaps that can afflict professional and private life. But with each extension of social security, its cost to the state, employers and workers has increased by leaps and bounds. In 1979-80 it represented up to 33.2 percent of the gross national income in the Netherlands. The Federal Republic of Germany, Denmark and Belgium devote almost as important a share of national income to social spending. At the other end of the scale, social expenditure only accounts for about 17 percent of Ireland's national income.

Since Europe entered the economic recession, Community governments have experienced major financial difficulties. As a result, most of them are looking for ways to cut social security spending by changing existing systems. This is particularly difficult since it is impossible to cut into benefits without arousing considerable public outcry. But it is also difficult to conduct any type of coordinated action since social security systems are structured differently from country to country.

The Statistical Office of the European Community has established a special method of analysing existing systems known as SESPROS, this allows for a comparison of the Community systems which reveals differences in the way each system is financed. For example, employers covered more than half of benefit financing in France (56 percent) and in Italy (58.8 percent). On the other hand, they only paid 9.6 percent in Denmark, where national and local authorities account for about 85 percent of finance.

The amounts spent on various benefit programmes also varies. For instance, old age pensions in the United Kingdom represent 42 percent of total expenditure. In Germany and Belgium it only represents 25.8 percent.

ENERGY: Conservation efforts to continue

A look at the figures seems to indicate that the storm clouds of an energy crisis are rapidly retreating on the European horizon. European imports of crude oil in 1981 were down 16.4 percent in the previous year. The current supply surplus means that oil prices are falling and producing countries are cutting back production.

The decrease in European Community oil imports has been prompted by several factors. Firstly, because oil consumption fell by 8 percent in 1980 and by about 9 percent in 1981. An increased use of oil substitutes, such as natural gas, coal and nuclear energy, was largely responsible. Petrol consumption for cars, however, only fell by 2 percent.

But it was the EEC's own production of crude oil which increased by 6.2 percent last year, reaching the impressive figure of 96 million tonnes which really made the difference.

Three new oil fields in the British part of the North Sea and two in the Danish section came on top and there are indications that Community production could go up by 10 percent in 1982.

This combination of favourable factors may have prompted European leaders to adopt a prematurely euphoric stance. However, while EEC officials are clearly satisfied with the Community's energy supply situation, there is a growing feeling that conservation efforts should continue. About 50 percent of the EEC's energy needs are currently met by petroleum and about 80 percent of the oil used by the EEC is imported.

EEC energy ministers meeting in Brussels on March 17 heard a serious warning issued by European Industry Commissioner Etienne Davignon. He told them that the decrease in energy consumption in the EEC was linked to the current economic recession, but that it was difficult to foresee how economic recovery would influence the EEC's energy consumption patterns. He also stressed that oil stock levels currently standing at 12 million tonnes should be maintained if another crisis provoked by an unexpected decision by the oil-producers was to be avoided.

ENVIRONMENT: Growing concern about acid rain

The worrying problem of "acid rain" has been discussed for so long that experts now feel it is time to actually start doing more about it before it does irreparable damage to life and the environment. The problem, caused by emissions of nitric and sulphurous substances from industrial and energy plants burning fossil fuels, has been noticeable since the 1960s. It destroys fish, wildlife, harvests and various plants. "Acid rain" is therefore not only a nuisance damaging leisure and natural settings, but also one that reduces the important economic resources. It has particularly affected some of the most unspoiled regions of the Northern Hemisphere which are at the receiving end of winds carrying poisonous particles discharged by tall factory smokestacks from industrial regions in neighbouring countries. As a result, the exhausts from the industrial parts of Germany or Britain land in Scandinavia and those from the United States wind up in Canada.

A study issued by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development in Paris about the problem in Sweden estimated that the cost of reducing these harmful emissions by about one third, by replacing fossil fuels, would cost about 12 billion Swedish crowns, or 2.5 - 3 percent of energy production costs. But this would result in direct profits amounting to about 5 billion crowns from improved harvests and fishing catches as well as savings on the damage caused to buildings, etc.

These problems were studied in detail recently at a seminar organised by the European Environmental Bureau entitled "Acid Rain - A Responsibility for the European Community", attended by some 60 representatives from environmental protection agencies in the EEC member states and Scandinavia. The aim of the seminar was to stress the fact that the problem was an international one that required the cooperation of the countries that were the source of the problem as well as the victims. Consequently, the European Community could have a large part to play in this effort and has already taken some action in the field. The participants mentioned the EEC Council of Ministers' decision in 1975 to exchange information among the member states on air pollution. Also in 1975, an EEC directive was adopted setting limits on sulphur in light fuels and in 1981 another one limited sulphur dioxide levels in the air. They noted that these were steps in the right direction but that other measures to include heavy fuels should be taken to relieve the problem.

The effort at international cooperation is expected to be followed up by another conference on air pollution in Stockholm in June.

HUMAN RIGHTS: Europe leads the fight

Examples of abuse and violation of basic human rights abound in the world today despite efforts undertaken by the United Nations, such as the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the work of Amnesty International and a host of other organisations and individuals.

In Afghanistan, South Africa, El Salvador, Turkey, Cambodia, Poland, Iran and Argentina, killing, torture, imprisonment have become rampant. In other countries, elections are falsified, trials are conducted illegally and press censorship is considered normal. Almost everywhere, human dignity is put to the test - almost daily.

Faced with such a situation, the free world should not give up hope. We, as Europeans, who enjoy the privilege of living in a democratic regime where each person can speak freely, have an obligation to fight for the human rights of others. Each life saved, each prisoner released means victory and hope for humanity as a whole.

European Community institutions have always made a point of condemning human rights violations. Leo Tindemans, the Belgian Foreign Minister, who is also the current President of the EEC Council of Ministers, was in Turkey recently to investigate the human rights situation following last year's military coup. He wanted assurances from Turkey's military rulers as regards their plans to restore democratic rule and democratic freedom.

Almost at the same time, March 21 was proclaimed "Afghanistan Day", following an initiative taken by the European Parliament. Several European leaders took the opportunity to call on all countries to respect the right to freedom and self-determination of the Afghan people and to call on the Soviet Union to find a solution to the twenty-seven month old crisis. The EEC has already given about 50 million dollars in food aid to the 2.5 million Afghan refugees currently seeking shelter in neighbouring countries.

On March 11, the European Parliament also voted two resolutions denouncing human rights violations taking place in Cambodia and El Salvador.

COMMUNICATIONS: Marconi meets the Space Age

When Marconi invented radio early this century, he staged a revolution which would change the face of the world. He gave civilisation a form of popular communication to transcend literacy and frontiers, penetrating the remotest areas to inform the uninformed about anything from politics to punk rock. For nearly 50 years radio and television have played a central role in our everyday life. Broadcasting has been used to inform, to politicize, to advertise and to generally win over people's hearts and minds by entertaining them. Among its achievements it numbers successes as diverse as fighting propaganda wars over the European airwaves during the 1940's and 1950's, toppling numerous Third World governments and making a major contribution to long-range education in the developing world. It also brought The Beatles to Japan.

Now, after more than half a century, Marconi's invention is to enter the Space Age in Europe with the introduction of satellite TV. By the end of 1982, a British-based company, Satellite Television, will be broadcasting to the whole of Europe, and other commercial and government-backed stations are expected to quickly follow suit over the next few years.

The implications of the move may mean, in the words of one commentator, "the biggest shake-up in the media in Europe since Gutenberg invented the printing press". Existing government controls over the electronic media at a national level are likely to be smashed, advertising to national audiences may become a thing of the past and TV, which is, like it or not, a central part of our culture, may become genuinely international and European in nature.

Some cooperation between the broadcasting networks of Europe already exists in the form of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), best known for its staging of the Eurovision Song Contest. It also operates as an agency for the exchange of news and programmes. In addition, cable TV has expanded viewing across frontiers in continental Europe in recent years, to give people an idea of what is going on in neighbouring countries.

But the satellite stations will mean a key to every European culture and language, beamed through the little parabolic receiver dish perched on your roof. European integrationists see the development as a marvellous opportunity for Europeans to understand each other better at a time of economic crisis, when closer links have never been more necessary.

The European Parliament has gone even further, by calling for a special satellite channel to be reserved for programmes of a specifically European nature. Approving a report by German Christian Democrat MEP Wilhelm Hahn, the Parliament said that such a channel might well improve people's attitudes towards the European Community, by inviting greater public participation and involvement in the activities of Europe.