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Sustainable Farming in a Difficult Climate: the Challenge of Rocks and Weather

Outlines of a presentation given by Ólafur R Dýrmundsson Ph.D., National Adviser on Organic Farming and Land Use, The Farmers Association of Iceland

The Republic of Iceland, an island of 103.000 km^2 (40.000 sq mi.), bordering on the Arctic Circle, is better known in the world for ice and fire than for agriculture. However, the nearly 4000 farmers of Iceland are producing food to the extent that the country is 100% self sufficient in meat, milk and eggs and 50% in vegetables for its population of 300.000 + 380.000 tourists per annum. There are even exports of horses, lamb, mink furs and eider-down. Although the area of cultivated land is small, mainly for silage and hay production, sheep and horses are grazed in large numbers on extensive rangeland pastures stretching from lowlands to high mountain slopes. Cattle production is nowadays confined to lowland areas, mainly dairying. Sustainable land use is based on native, well adapted, hardy, yet highly productive, breeds of dairy cattle, sheep and horses, and small numbers of native goats and poultry still exist, all of Nordic origin. Vegetables and barley are grown in certain areas and geothermal heating in greenhouses enables a number of farmers to grow crops, such as tomatoes and cucumbers. Recent developments include organic farming, and large scale forestry and soil reclamation with active participation of the farming community. Icelandic agricultural products enjoy a strong quality image, animal welfare standards are high and a Capacent-Gallup opinion poll carried out a few months ago showed that 94% of consumers consider it important to maintain Icelandic agriculture and 80% of them consider that the country shall remain self sufficient as much as possible and not dependent on imports more than necessary. In a global context Iceland is, in spite of its climatic and geological disadvantages, favoured by valuable sources of hydroelectric and geothermal energy, pollution is negligible and unsustainable factory/industrial farming has not yet made any impact except in the pig and poultry sectors. With growing concern in the world about negative consequences of climate change and higher energy prices, the role of marginal areas in producing food sustainably for local consumption, needs to be revalued. Icelandic farmers and their families are able and willing to raise livestock and grow crops, as well as to maintain rural communities, biodiversity and cultural landscape, provided the market is willing to pay a fair price for their products which can sustain decent farm income. They have been facing the challenges of rocks and weather for centuries but now, in the beginning of the 21st century, globalization and world economy seem to be the greatest challenges facing Icelandic farmers.