Denmark rocked by malthusian drive to end farmers' use of fertilizers

by Poul Rasmussen

Would you sell your country for half a bucket of Norwegian lobsters? Most people would not, but it seems that a majority in the Danish parliament is more than willing to do just that.

In the first week of February, parliament was set to review a government action plan aimed at reducing the leaching of nitrogen and phosphorous into the Danish coastal waters by 50% and 80%, respectively, within the next three years.

On the pretext that nitrogen is a "major pollutant," the government's plan aims at a reduction in agricultural usage of nitrogen fertilizers by approximately 25%.

The key to the Danish economy

More than one-third of total Danish exports consists of food and agricultural products. Last year, Danish agriculture exported 60 billion Danish crowns (Dkr) worth of goods. Danish agriculture has extremely high productivity. Some 90,000 Danish farmers produced food for 15 million people. Denmark's total population is only 5 million. So, Denmark exported two-thirds of its total agricultural production.

In Denmark, as anywhere else where modern, industrialized, high-energy food production has been applied, the key to success has been the introduction of nitrogen fertilizers. Nitrogen is an essential raw material for living organisms, and the successful identification of the role of nitrogen formed the foundation of modern agriculture. Without nitrogen fertilizers, it would be physically impossible to achieve the production levels we see today.

Preliminary calculations by the Danish Agricultural Association estimate that a 25% reduction in the application of nitrogen fertilizers would result in an average 7-10% reduction in yields per hectare, depending on the quality of soil and other local factors. In terms of money, this represents an immediate loss of more than a half-billion crowns. Even if Danish farmers compensate by changing crops (i.e., shifting to less nitrogen-dependent crops like peas, beans, etc.) or make the application of fertilizers more effective through computerized control programs, the cumulative loss over a few years would run up to several billion crowns. This would be the end of Danish agriculture—and in turn, the end of the Danish economy.

How did the Danish parliament get the crazy idea of reducing Danish farmers' usage of nitrogen fertilizers? The story is almost unbelievable. It involves a number of bureaucrats in the Environmental Protection Ministry, the chairman of a private environmental protection organization, Danish national television—and half a bucket of dead lobsters.

For years, a number of fanatical environmentalists in a variety of organizations, including the Danish Ministry of Environmental Protection, have tried to portray the leaching of nitrogen from land areas to fresh-water streams and shallow coastal waters as a major environmental problem. An impressive number of reports has been produced, all claiming—without any foundation—that this is the result of the agricultural use of nitrogen fertilizers. But since nitrogen levels in drinking water have remained far below the levels recommended by the World Health Organization, and since fishing activity in the Baltic, the Belts (as the straits off the Danish coast are called), and the Kattegat strait have remained unharmed by this "pollution," nobody listened to these fanatics. It was an obvious hoax.

But in the summer of 1986, all this changed. Danish national television ran a number of stories claiming that not only coastal waters, but major parts of the Kattegat and the Belts are now dead waters—without life, due to pollution.

Nobody reacted to these stories until the end of the summer, when adverse weather conditions produced an acute oxygen-deficiency in some parts of the Kattegat. This is a phenomenon that has been occurring in the Belts and the Kattegat for thousands of years. Hot summers with little or no wind reduce the mixing of the water coming in from the North Sea with the shallow waters in the Belts and the Kattegat, causing local deficiencies of oxygen.

But, now Danish TV reporters could illustrate their anti-agriculture stories with pictures of dead Norwegian lobsters—literally, a half-bucket full. The chairman of the Danish Association for the Preservation of Nature (*Danmarks*

Naturfredningsforening), David Rehling, went on television to proclaim that this was the direct result of the leaching of nitrogen from Danish farmland into the waters of the Kattegat, causing an increased production of algae, and thereby depleting the oxygen in the sea.

On this basis, the Danish government and parliament went into action. The Minister for Environmental Protection, Christian Christensen, demanded an immediate reduction in agricultural usage of nitrogen fertilizers by 100,000-145,000 tons.

Finally, on Nov. 18, 1986, parliament ordered the government to present a comprehensive plan by Feb. 1, to guarantee that the leaching of nitrogen and phosphorous is reduced by 50% and 80%, respectively, within three years.

A $4 billion nightmare

The parliamentary directive came close to putting Denmark's coalition government out of its misery. On Jan. 31, Prime Minister Poul Schlüter had to convene an emergency meeting of ministers in an attempt to resolve the deep divisions that had erupted concerning measures against farmers' usage of nitrogen.

A contributing factor to the break in government unity was an open letter to parliament, dated Jan. 19, from the Schiller Institute's International Agricultural Commission, exposing the hoax behind the entire campaign against nitrogen fertilizers. The letter warned in the strongest terms against the economic consequences of a forced cut-back in fertilizer use.

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Publicity surrounding this letter, combined with a mobilization of various Danish farm organizations, caused the liberal Venstre Party (traditionally the party representing Danish farmers, and a partner in the coalition government), to flatly refuse any specific reduction in fertilizer application.

The result was an open confrontation between Minister of Environmental Protection Christensen, of the small Christian Popular Party, and Minister of Agriculture Britta Schall-Holberg of the Venstre Party.

After several hours of intense negotiations, Prime Min-

ister Schlüter came up with a compromise. The resulting 12-billion Dkr action plan (about U.S. $4 billion) left out any measures specifically aimed at reducing the use of nitrogen fertilizers.

Nonetheless, the plan is a nightmare for the Danish economy. First of all, 12 billion crowns is equivalent to the annual Danish defense budget. Moreover, these monies have to be found outside of the present national budget.

Expenditures will be as follows:

- Municipal sewage purification: 6 billion Dkr.
- Industrial waste-water purification: 1.5 billion Dkr.
- Changing of agricultural fertilization plans: 4.5 billion Dkr.

Although no rationing of nitrogen fertilizers is included, the plan does aim at inducing farmers to "voluntarily" reduce the consumption of commercial fertilizers by 130,000-140,000 tons. It also includes a mandatory "greening" of fields by planting winter crops. Both measures bring Danish agriculture a big step closer to bankruptcy.

A dangerous precedent

If the plan directly or indirectly succeeds in producing a reduction in the application of nitrogen fertilizers, a whole new and very dangerous element will have been introduced into the malthusians' campaign to reduce world food production. The *Financial Times* of London, in an article written by John Cherrington on Nov. 25, described it this way:

> Events in Denmark, where the Parliament called last week for measures to reduce pollution caused by nitrogen fertilizers, are making waves among farmers and fertilizer manufacturers in the rest of Europe.
>
> The Folketinget's [parliament's] decision, which could lead the government to enforce a 25% cut in use of fertilizers, was made on purely environmental grounds. . . . But, if Denmark does impose nitrogen rationing, its experience will be monitored as closely by those who advocate such measures for the purpose of controlling EC farm output, as by environmentalists.
>
> Evidence provided by the Danish experiment could help to resolve important questions about the efficacy of such a policy and the degree of hardship it might cause in the farming community. . . .

In a private interview with an American journalist, the director of the Danish Association for the Preservation of Nature, David Rehling, admitted that there was more to this campaign than saving the lives of a few Norwegian lobsters in the Kattegat. Mr. Rehling stated: "This is only the beginning of a 5- to 10-year total assault. We are in a battle to totally restructure Danish agriculture."

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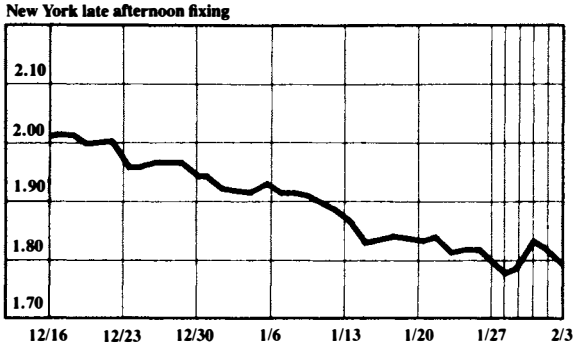
Currency Rates

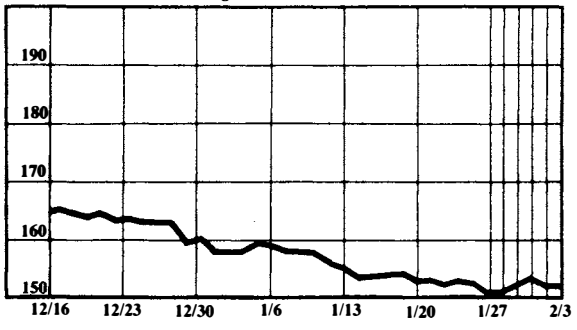
The dollar in deutschemarks

New York late afternoon fixing



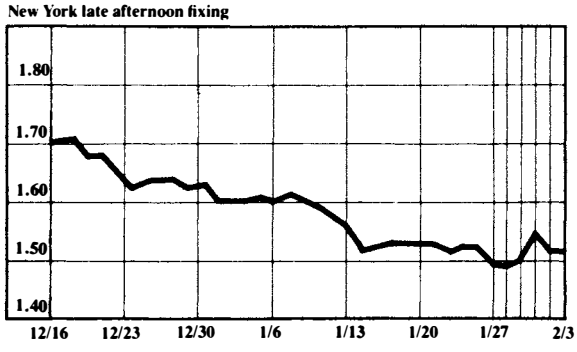
The dollar in yen

New York late afternoon fixing



The dollar in Swiss francs

New York late afternoon fixing



The British pound in dollars

New York late afternoon fixing