

Drought Destroying French Food Stocks

by Christine Bierre

June 2—As of the end of May, the government in France had to begin taking some measures to deal with one of the worst droughts to hit the nation in decades. First, there was a major shortfall of rain through the Autumn and Winter, leading to a drawdown of groundwater. This continued with a major shortfall of rain over the last three months, combined with unusually hot weather in the Spring. This April was the second-hottest in 100 years, 4 degrees higher than the 1971-2000 average, and the driest since 1959. Government measures included aid to cattle growers, and restrictions on non-essential water usage.

This year's wheat crop has been irreversibly damaged. France's soft wheat harvest will be the smallest in at least four years, which is an automatic hit to the world supply. France is the world's second-largest exporter of wheat after the United States, shipping the grain both within and beyond the European Union. This is a catastrophe.

Soils in the north of France, where 80% of the country's wheat is grown, were already the driest in over 50 years, as of April.

Cattle growers are very hard hit, and have run out of fodder for their animals. The only alternative at this point is to turn to the straw left over from the Winter wheat fields. But this will just keep the animals alive, since straw's nutritive value is close to zero. Most of the cattle growers have started slaughtering their animals, and now the meat market is saturated.

The government has begun to take some measures: 50 out of the 100 departments (counties) of France have taken emergency measures to restrict water use; the government will use a disaster fund to compensate cattle growers for their losses, which have reached hundreds of millions of euros. Fund officials will meet on June 15; and aid will be delivered before Sept. 15. Wheat growers expect to turn to their insurers for compensation.

The government moved to get the Crédit Agricole, the main farming bank, to open up low-interest emergency credit lines to farmers: 1.5% for young farmers, and 2% for older ones. Insurance companies have also been pressured by Paris to contribute to the overall effort. They have extended their guarantees to transport and store hay nationwide, in particular, for coverage from potential fire and other hazards—which will increase with this extreme hot weather.

This is, of course, only short term, and *a posteriori* aid. What is really needed—and Solidarité et Progrès Presidential candidate Jacques Cheminade is calling for this—is to eliminate the EU Malthusian directives which have been used through laws in every country to discourage the capture of rainwater, either in reservoirs, or artificial lake systems—to limit intensive farming. Only 3% of the rainfall is used in France, whose precipitation is normally among the lushest in Europe.