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Netherlands - Policy and Governance

Balancing Environmental Stability and Agricultural Productivity in The Netherlands

1.0 Introduction

The Netherlands–a country half the size of South Carolina–is the world's second-largest exporter of agricultural products by value (Reiley, 2022). Dutch agriculture supports European milk production through advanced processing infrastructure, high intensity, and yield optimization ("The Dutch Dairy Industry," 2026). Because Dutch dairy supplies both domestic and international markets, policy decisions within the country can influence food systems far beyond its borders. In recent years, the Netherlands have become leaders in efficient, maximised, and sustainable dairy farming, with competitive practices in order to comply with European Union (EU) policies. However, balancing environmental protection and food security can create difficult trade-offs. In the last 30 years, nitrogen pollution has become a major point of urgency for the EU, most notably illustrated in their Natura 2000 mandate– with a focus on protecting valuable land biodiversity throughout Europe. In practice, however, many Dutch farmers argue that they have had limited input in policies that most directly affect their livelihoods. To protect both vulnerable ecosystems and global food security, the Netherlands must bridge the disconnect between high-level decision makers and the rural communities they govern. By establishing regional dairy advisory councils that bring farmers, scientists, and politicians to the same table, the government can design policy collaboratively—achieving ambitious environmental targets while keeping family farms viable for generations to come.

2.0 Country and Culture

Despite having a population of just 18.4 million people on roughly 16,000 square miles of land, which is administratively divided into 12 distinct provinces, nearly two-thirds of the Netherlands' territory is used for agriculture (Netherlands, n.d.). Furthermore, since medieval times, "gouda [cheese] allowed the Netherlands' fast-growing dairy industry to take full advantage of its rich milk" ("The Cheese Lover's Guide," n.d.). This cheese has been a Dutch cultural staple and source of pride for hundreds of years, demonstrating the national importance of the country's dairy industry. Additionally, most farms are family-run operations, passed down from generation to generation ("Family Farming," n.d.). Given the Netherlands' position as one of Europe's most intensive dairy producers, the success of family-run farms is closely tied to the country's rural communities and agricultural competitiveness. Because agriculture is so deeply embedded within both the Dutch economy and culture, policy changes affecting farmers can have major social and economic consequences.

Currently, the Netherlands has an undeniable role in food supply chains beyond their national borders. 23% of Dutch exports (which largely consist of agricultural products) go to Germany, 12% go to Belgium, 8% reach France, 6% to the UK, and 5% go to the United States (Netherlands Trade, 2023). These trade relationships demonstrate the major influence Dutch agriculture has on both regional and international food markets. Since many neighboring countries rely on Dutch agricultural imports, shifts in Dutch production can quickly impact global food supply chains. Thus, changes in Dutch farming policies can influence food availability, pricing, and stability far beyond the country's borders.

3.0 Challenges and Impacts

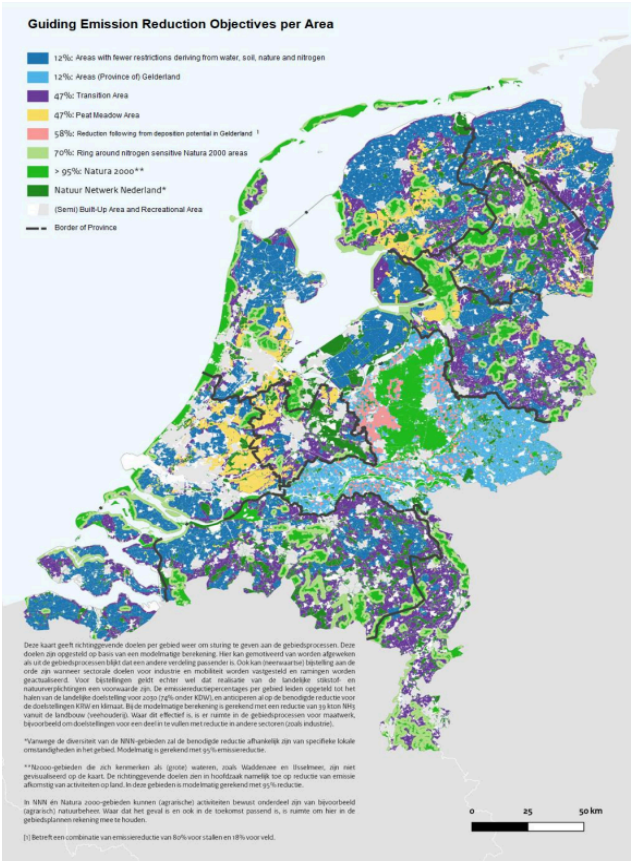
Towards the end of the 20th century, as environmental standards tightened across Europe, Dutch farmers faced increasing regulations aimed at reducing nitrogen emissions. The EU's Natura 2000 framework exemplifies this shift, establishing a network of protected areas in order to preserve European biodiversity. Under this mandate, member states were required to limit activities that could damage nearby habitats

(Natura 2000, 2025). In response, the Dutch government introduced the Nitrogen Action Program (PAS National) in 2015, which permitted ongoing economic activity on the premise of future nitrogen reductions by 2030. However, PAS National was struck down by the Dutch Council of State in 2019, forcing the government to adopt aggressive, short-term reduction targets ("Nitrogen and PFAS", 2020). These drastic measures were highlighted in a 2022 government target map (see Figure 1) that called for nitrogen reductions of up to 95% in certain zones. Demands of this scale made farm operations nearly impossible, and caused agricultural land values to plunge (van der Hoek, 2022). In response, the government offered voluntary farm buyouts worth up to 120% of farm value. This initiative was widely criticised, as working-class farmers viewed the buyout scheme not as an opportunity, but as a direct threat to rural communities and generational tradition–igniting nationwide protests (Blackett, 2023). Together, these policies revealed how environmental regulation implemented without sufficient farmer input can create severe social and economic instability within the agricultural sector.

Figure 1

Dutch government nitrogen reduction targets by region (2022).

Note. From Government Presents National Program to Reduce Nitrogen Greenhouse Gas Emissions in Rural Areas (GAIN Report), by M. van der Hoek, U.S. Department of Agriculture Foreign Agricultural Service, 2022.



For family-run operations, these sudden regulatory mandates created severe economic instability and compromised the long-term viability of their businesses. Financial institutions quickly adjusted to the regulatory risk; most notably Rabobank–the primary agricultural lender in the Netherlands– announced it would no longer finance farms located near protected Natura 2000 sites ("Rabobank won't finance," 2022). This abrupt contraction of credit restricted farmers' ability to secure capital, upgrade equipment, or invest in modernization technologies. Trapped between plummeting revenues, restricted loan access, and steep compliance burdens, many working-class families were forced to choose between abandoning their ancestral

livelihoods or facing bankruptcy. This systemic breakdown underscored a fundamental policy flaw: regulations designed in isolation failed to account for the operational realities of the farmers required to execute them.

Because the Netherlands serves as a primary engine of global dairy export, destabilizing its agricultural foundation carries profound international consequences. Key trade partners–including Germany, Belgium, France, and the United States–rely heavily on Dutch food products ("Netherlands Food Products," 2023). As highlighted by the Sustainable Food Trust, stringent environmental mandates inflate input expenses, particularly for fuel and fertilizer; when these operational costs outpace crop and dairy values, farmers are forced to reduce output, driving up food prices for domestic and global consumers alike ("Why Are Farmers," 2022). When regulatory uncertainties disrupt production at the source, regional and global food supply chains feel the impact. Ultimately, imposing disconnected environmental targets without practical agricultural input jeopardizes both regional economic stability and global food security.

4.0 Formal Dairy Advisory Councils

4.1 Existing Representation

A common issue in governance, that resurfaces throughout history, is the implementation of inadequate mandates placed upon a group of people with little to no say in the making of it. Such mandates can often lead to resentment of the government as well as political mobilization; as was demonstrated in the Netherlands' ongoing farmers protests beginning in 2019, which contributed to the rise of the Farmer-Citizen movement and its eventual emergence as the largest political party in the Dutch Senate by 2023 (Otjes, 2023). Although, it should be noted that the Netherlands does currently have an association known as LTO Nederland– serving as the main agricultural and horticultural lobbying organization within the country. However, LTO Nederland is a group that stands between farmers and politicians; therefore, only so many interests can be relayed with the intense severity that they would have if they came from the farmers themselves. The organization focuses on communicating farmers' concerns to policymakers, but the farmers themselves do not have a formal or physical role in evaluating, shaping, or even discussing regulations that most directly affect them. This limitation can become especially evident once environmental policies begin dictating whether a farm can afford to continue operating, since a politician will likely not anticipate how regulations will be implemented at a farm level. For these reasons, I propose the establishment of regional dairy advisory councils, intended to bring together representatives of all different stakeholders that contribute to environmental policy surrounding agricultural production, including farmers, politicians, and scientists.

4.2 Necessary Change

Given that existing representation has proven insufficient, the Netherlands must re-evaluate how agricultural policy is developed—and, more importantly, who is invited to shape it. A vital component of the proposed regional dairy advisory councils is direct, in-person participation, providing a platform where stakeholders can clearly articulate their perspectives before regulations are finalized and enforced. These council meetings would function as a collaborative forum where farmers would offer practical operational insights and economic realities, scientists would contribute environmental and agricultural expertise, and policymakers would align discussions with statutory mandates and regulatory priorities. Rather than stripping elected officials of their legislative authority, these councils would serve as an advisory platform, allowing policymakers to stress-test policies against real-world agricultural conditions before enactment. A compelling precedent for this approach exists in Australia's Landcare and catchment management programs where state-sponsored community participation brought government actors, local landholders, and technical experts together to address natural resource degradation. This collaborative framework not only significantly increased the adoption rates of sustainable land-management practices, but also fostered peer-to-peer knowledge sharing among farmers facing localized environmental challenges (Curtis, 2000). By giving rural farmers a genuine stake in policy development, the Landcare model cultivated higher farmer satisfaction and improved long-term agricultural productivity. Adopting a similar decentralized structure in the Netherlands would ensure governance accounts for regional nuances. Establishing at least one council in each of the twelve Dutch provinces would minimize travel barriers for farmers while addressing distinct regional soil

types, livestock densities, and farming practices. By facilitating structured dialogue between practical agricultural expertise and regulatory governance, these councils would build a more resilient, trusted, and sustainable framework for policy design.

4.3 Implementation

To make regional dairy advisory councils effective, the Netherlands would need to establish a clear structure for their creation, funding, and operation. Rather than immediately introducing councils throughout the country, the government may begin with a pilot program running in one or two of the highest dairy-producing provinces, and expand the model after evaluating its effectiveness. Initial funding would come from the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, Food Security and Nature to cover meeting facilities, administrative costs, and compensation for participating farmers. An independent coordinator could organize meetings, collect recommendations, and ensure that farmers, scientists, and policymakers receive equal opportunities to contribute. And although the councils would not have the authority to create legislation, policymakers should be required to formally review and respond to their recommendations before finalizing major nitrogen regulations affecting dairy farms. After a year, the pilot program could be evaluated according to farmer participation, changes made to regulations, farmer satisfaction, compliance, and the economic and environmental outcome of the policies developed with the influence of the councils. By beginning the project with a monitored regional pilot, the Netherlands could test whether provincial farmer participation produces more practical, trusted, and sustainable nitrogen policies, before expanding the model nationwide.

5.0 Recommendation

I recommend that the Dutch government establish regional dairy advisory councils across its twelve provinces, beginning with a targeted pilot program in one or two of the country's top milk-producing regions. By giving working-class farmers, agricultural scientists, and politicians an equal seat at the table before regulations are finalized, the Netherlands can move away from reactive crisis management and towards genuine cooperation. This approach does not strip elected officials of their authority to govern; instead, it ensures that environmental policies are based on the real-world operational and financial realities of the people who must carry them out.

6.0 Conclusion

Protecting the environment does not have to come at the expense of family farms and rural livelihoods. As a cornerstone of European agriculture and global food trade, the Netherlands has an opportunity to lead by example. By replacing disconnected mandates with collaborative policy design, the government can build a truly sustainable agricultural system–one that meets strict environmental goals while keeping working-class farmers in business and securing affordable food supplies for people around the world.

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