

# In the conflicting area of agriculture and water protection



**Andreas Zehnder, Agric. Eng. HTL,** is leader of the Monitoring and Control Service of the Agriculture Office Schaffhausen and is active as a consultant in the fields of cultivation and ecology.



**Jürg Hertz, Deputy Head of the Department for Environment Protection in Canton Thurgau.**



**Ueli Bundi, Acting Director of EAWAG,** is concerned with questions of environmental policy, water industry and water-course assessment.

Water protection is an important basis to the economic viability of the Swiss agricultural enterprises in respect of the proof for environmental performance (PEP). If a farmer breaks the rules of the Water Protection Legislation, his direct payments could be withheld.

Subjects such as the influence of antibiotics, natural and mineral fertilizers, and pesticides to aquatic ecosystems are current issues and cannot be brushed aside in discussions of agriculture. It is therefore indispensable that the risks that these substances present for the water are investigated and that from this knowledge, targeted measures for the minimization of water loads are developed. On the other hand, policy-makers must integrate this knowledge into the future orientation of Swiss agricultural policy.

As a consultant for an environmentally friendly agricultural production, one question concerning the water protection discussion lies particularly close to my heart: "How do I say this to the farmers?"

Water protection is not the only nor the greatest problem farmers face today. Besides the impositions regulated by the environmental legislation, operational and production technical questions are essential for the survival of an agriculture enterprise. Our main task is, therefore, to pass on the knowledge gained from research and policy in a comprehensible form to the farmers, so that they are convinced of the necessity of ecological measures. My experience shows that in agricultural consulting the following expression is most applicable: For the transfer of ideas, the language is more important than the dialect.

Agriculture lies in the contradictory context between private management and public commitment. More than 4 billion francs of direct payments and subsidies flow annually into farming – a part of which is allocated for ecological services.

These services must be defined, controlled and communicated. The requirements should be clear, unambiguous and meaningful, and be equal between all cantons in validity and application. Restrictions in entrepreneurial management are unwelcome and are viewed as chicanery. Policy and public demand consistent but not too strict control, and expect in addition an improvement of the environmental situation by means of the applied measures, and the production of healthy, tasty, and competitive foodstuffs.

Swiss agriculture operates in a conflicting area also affecting the accomplishment of environmental protection. The balance between interventions and self responsibility must be maintained, as well as the harmonization of the intercantonal implementation, to minimize regional differences. These are just two issues to which the environmental protection authorities are confronted in the field of agriculture.

The central point is communication at all levels: on the political level the demands of environmental protection need to be well-founded, well-represented and balanced between all stakeholders. In implementation, it is necessary to provide good explanations to all those affected by the measures, to gain their acceptance. And the public must become more aware of the ecological services which have already been achieved by the agricultural sector.

The integration of environmental protection into industrial sectors is a central postulate of environmental, economic and regional policy. Agriculture has accepted the challenge and has been following this path now for 15 years. There still remains, however, a great need for further action.

The rural landscape in intensively used areas is still strongly depleted, with its streams completely destroyed or stripped of their protective and landscape forming riparian vegetation. The re-establishment of a natural stream network requires agricultural land and is one of the most important future tasks.

The nitrogen targets of the 1999 agricultural policy could not be achieved. The main reason for this is the nitrogen imported in the form of fertilizer and fodder. An optimized management system would allow nitrogen to be better used and thereby losses to be reduced. This would also limit the quantities of importable auxiliary agents. This is the case for both Swiss agriculture as a whole and for many individual agricultural enterprises.

Agro-ecological goals should be primarily pursued by means of an economic incentives system. These incentives will encroach the borders of international regulation regimes and economic acceptability.

Thus, agriculture as well as the rural areas as a whole see a difficult future ahead. In this context, enormous structural, economic and social problems have to be solved across Europe. New visions for a sustainable development of rural areas and agriculture as its vital industry are urgently required.