

## Viewpoint: Farmer protests in Europe challenges misguided restrictions on biotechnology innovation

**(The Center Square) – Bill Wirtz**



Over the summer, farmers in the Netherlands vehemently protested against the government's new environmental rules. Over multiple weeks, thousands of farmers burned hay bales and blocked roads and food distribution centers in an effort to draw attention to new EU rules that would paralyze the sector.

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Credit: ANP/AFP via Getty Images

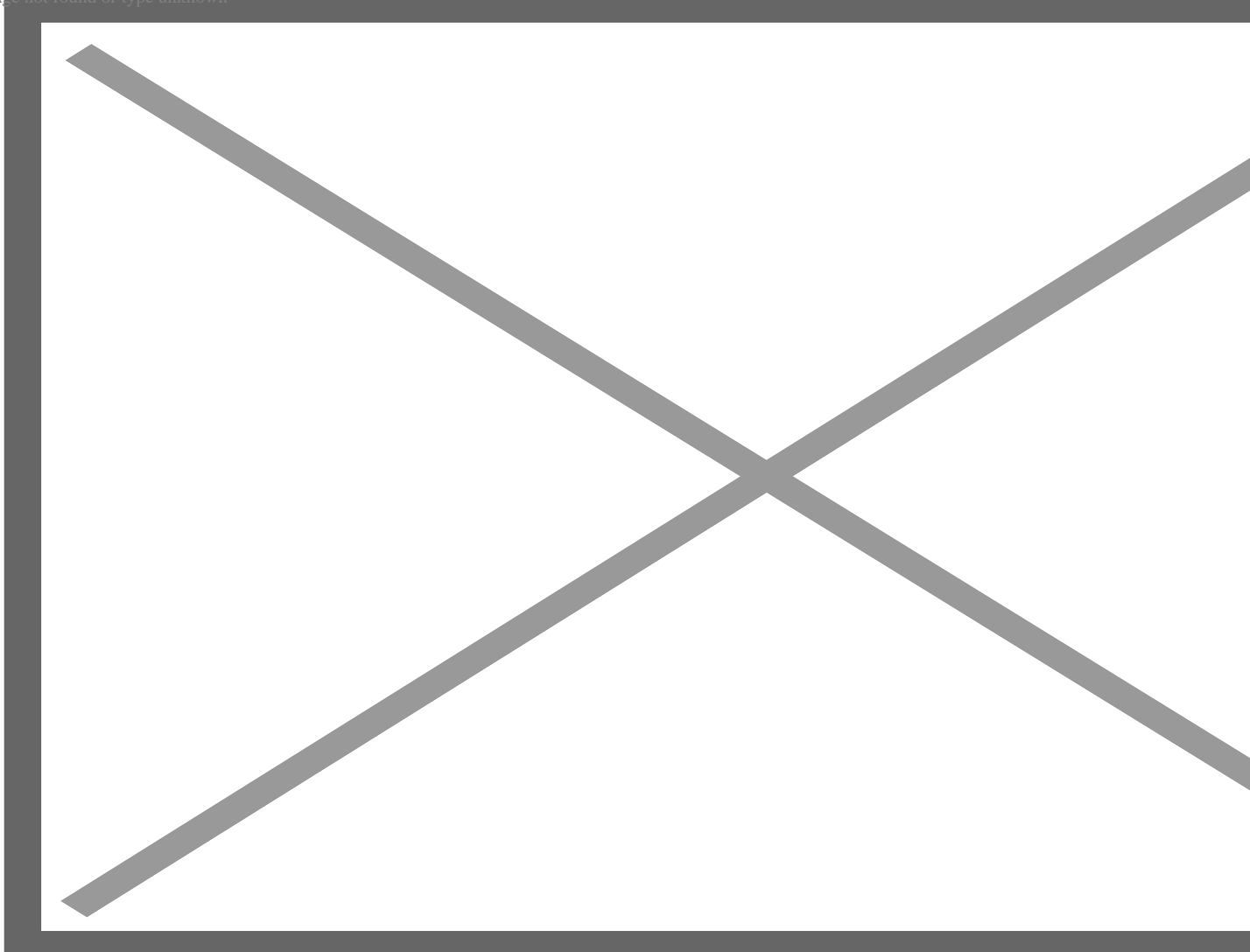
The government in The Hague attempts to follow EU guidelines by slashing nitrogen emissions by 50% by 2030. Nitrous oxide and methane emissions are byproducts of livestock, for instance, when manure is deposited. The Netherlands – along with Denmark, Ireland and the Flanders region of Belgium – had exemptions on EU manure caps because of their small land areas, but that exemption is set to end for Dutch farmers. In practice, this means a considerable reduction in farm animals and putting numerous dairy farmers out of business.

Even with the prospect of the government buying them out, livestock farmers still aren't on board with the

EU's plans. The prospect of a considerable reduction in farm animals would also endanger the country's beloved traditional dairy products, such as Gouda and Edam cheeses. The farmers' protests have now led to the resignation of Agriculture Minister Henk Staghouwer – who had been in office for less than a year – yet the government still remains steadfast in its decision to follow EU guidelines.

The European Union unveiled its “Farm to Fork” strategy at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The plan calls for a significant reduction in synthetic pesticides and fertilizers, as well as an increase in organic farming output. The European Commission, the executive arm of the EU in Brussels, structurally unveils legislative packages that make those plans a reality but have run into criticism from farmers and consumers. When USDA did an impact assessment on the effects of the strategy, it found that agricultural prices would soar between 20 and 53 percent. The EU itself did not present an impact assessment.

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Credit: USDA

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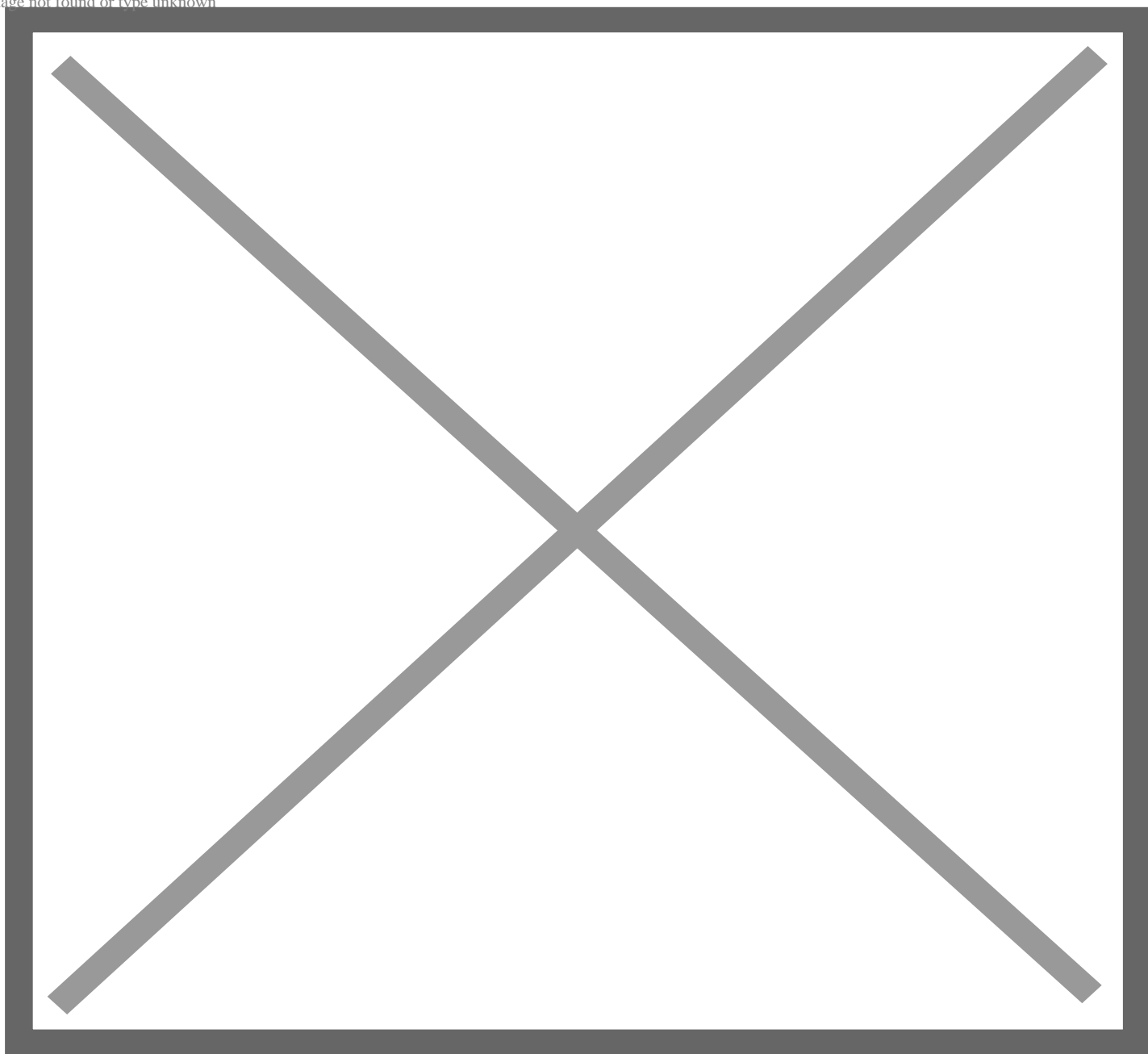
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With mounting criticism and overall food price inflation, the European Council (which represents EU member states) is now delaying the implementation of the cut in pesticides, particularly as countries in Central and Eastern Europe fear it would increase food prices further. "In countries such as Spain, if you impose a 50 per cent cut in the usage, you would have a major cut in output," one diplomat told the Financial Times.

The farmer protests in the Netherlands are only the tip of the iceberg of the pandora's box the EU has opened by meddling with Europe's farming system. Environmentalism's utopic and distorted view of agriculture clashes with the real needs of consumers. In fact, Europe's solution of increasing organic farming is counterproductive to the goal of reducing carbon dioxide emissions. CO2 emissions will increase by up to a whopping 70 percent if organic farming becomes the norm, as researchers in the United Kingdom have shown. The reason is simple: organic agriculture needs more resources and more farmland to achieve the same output. This makes organic food not only worse for the environment but also more expensive for consumers.

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Credit: L. Smith et. al.

For the United States, which has dabbled in similar attempts to make farming more “sustainable,” this is a cautionary tale. Europe is finding out the hard way how its ambitious policies are reducing purchasing power on a continent where citizens already spend much more of their disposable income on food compared to Americans. To an even larger extent, Sri Lanka’s policy of banning synthetic crop protection in a short period of time has laid out how green farming policies transform a thriving economy into a nation dependent on foreign food aid.

Americans must understand that our food system is conditional on productivity and safety, both things that crop protection tools make possible. In fact, pesticide use is not comparable to how it used to be in the 60s: according to USDA, pesticide persistence has been cut in half in the last 60 years, and chemical pesticide use has been reduced by 40% (per acre). In essence, this means that we have produced more food with less land and less crop protection. We should trust farmers and experts to improve this even further without the need for blanket bans that hurt consumers.

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