



## Climate debate captures Dutch dairy



*Dairy farmers in the Netherlands must now commit to a process of 'circular agriculture' balancing inputs and outputs, or go out of business. Dutch agricultural journalist **Sjoerd Hofstee** writes.*

**C**limate and CO<sup>2</sup>. Those are the new 'magic words' in Dutch dairy, among others from politicians. Although no more than 11% of

greenhouse gases in the Netherlands is caused by the agricultural sector, it, along with transport and industry, is designated as one of the major responsible players for the excess of carbon dioxide emissions.

Politicians, local and national, have made strong efforts to enforce the agricultural sector to reduce emissions. That hurts dairy farmers on peat soils hard; and they form at least 10% of the country's remaining 17,000 dairy farmers. Their ability to farm will be shut down by plans to considerably raise the groundwater-level of these lands in coming years.

The peat soils were drained decades ago, but moves are afoot to increase the groundwater level due to problems with subsidence but because peat soil oxidizes and releases CO<sup>2</sup>. When the plans come to fruition, dairy farmers on these soils will definitely be forced to quit farming.

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For the past few years all Dutch dairy farmers must annually fill in a so called 'Cycle Guide'. A Cycle Guide can be seen as a sort of 'local circular economy' of nutrients on one dairy farm. By filling in this Cycle Guide, a farmer justifies all their input and output of manure and milk. The

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inputs and outputs must be in balance in terms of nutrients as much as possible, otherwise the farmer is obligated to get rid of manure at a high cost.

Dairy farmers complain strongly about the hassles this bureaucracy causes. And it's disproportionate to other industries. Does Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam, where every day more than 1000 planes

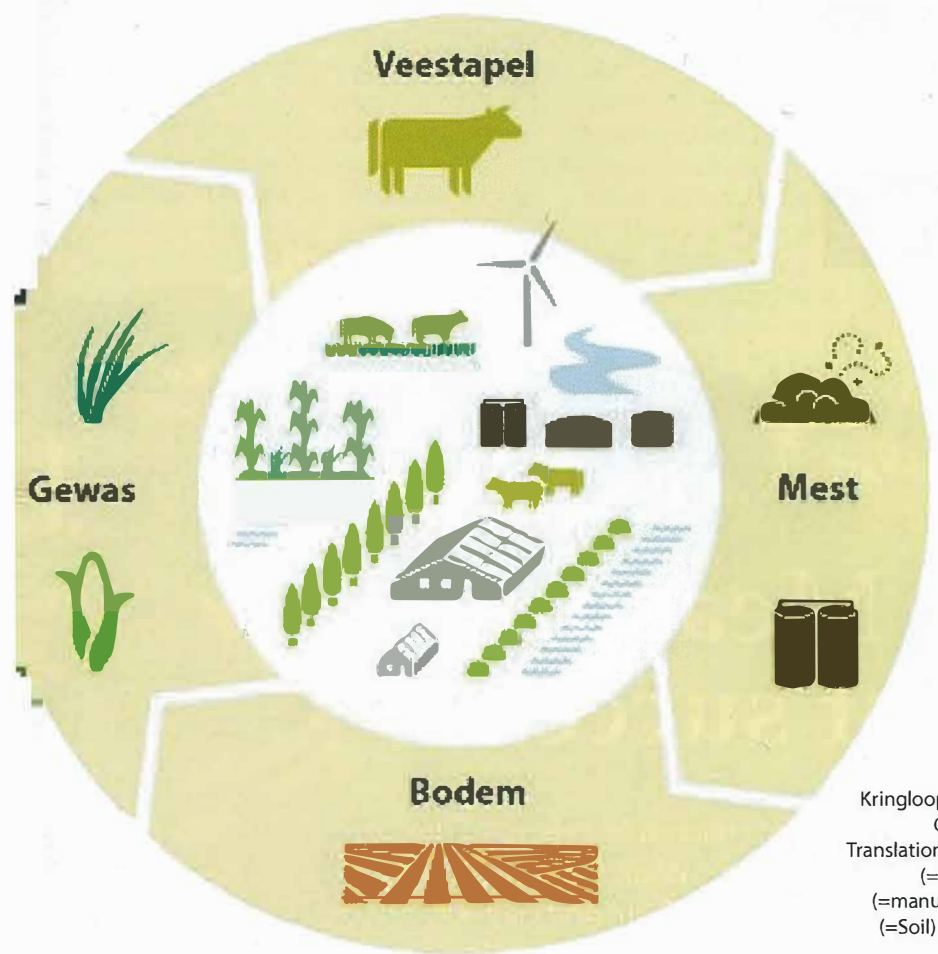
come and go, has to fill in 'Cycle Guide'? No way. What they do is expand, they are not being fiscally charged and this pollutes enormously in sense of CO<sup>2</sup>-emissions.

Complaining to their dairy factories brings dairy farmers not a lot of help. The 'Cycle Guide' is set and obligated by the dairy factories. Why? Because those companies who purchase dairy products, demand it. Though, the way to Circular Agriculture is not all negative.

In August 2018 the Dutch Minister of Agriculture, Carola Schouten, presented her vision aimed at the road to 2030. In

her vision, Schouten didn't say a small dairy farm is doing well and a large dairy farm with many animals and a high input of raw materials for the concentrated feed is doing bad.

She just determined that there is a future for every type of farmer, as long as the farm closes the Cycle Guide and stops importing feed from all over the



Kringloopwijzer' the Cycle Guide  
Translation: Veestapel (=herd), Mest (=manure), Bodem (=Soil) and Gewas (=Crops).

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world. This must raise the value of the Dutch agriculture and reduce harmful emissions.

In New Zealand you are already talking about allowing a few tonnes more or less of palm kernel, that's nothing compared to the huge amount of soy and other materials being shipped towards our ports.

Imports of feed and large numbers of animals on a relatively small area has an undeniable impact on the ecological footprint, but farmers feel this has to be seen in perspective. Schouten admitted this.

For farmers it was therefore nice to

hear Schouten refuses to go along with the increasingly louder social call in the Netherlands, and other Western European countries, to reduce livestock numbers. Because, as she said, by doing that we will import more cheap meat from other countries.

Is that then the sustainability our country is waiting for? Do we know more

about where our food comes from then?

"If we only talk about numbers of animals, we will miss the essence and the international context with open borders in which the Netherlands simply operates," Shouten said.

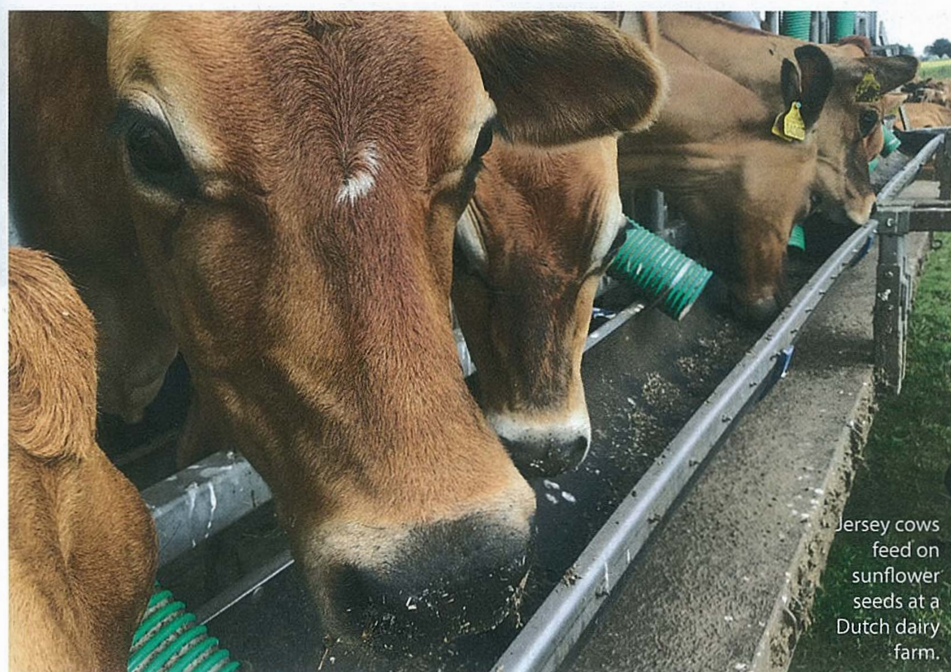
However Shouten's vision honestly offers little more concrete detail.

How do farmers have to transform their farms so they fit into the "circular agriculture" being preached? And how do you still earn money as a dairy farmer if you have to invest in expensive land at €60,000/hectare to be able to close the Cycle Guide?

Unfortunately, those answers are not there.

Intensification – more cows per hectare – is no longer rewarded. Feed must come from the region and manure must be able to be placed on soils in the region.

In 10 years any dairy farmers in the Netherlands who do not reach these objectives will be out of business.



Jersey cows feed on sunflower seeds at a Dutch dairy farm.

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