

## New role for farmers in society

*Summary of the opening statement by Hansjörg Walter  
Workshop 1: Swiss agricultural policy faced with new challenges*

Difficult times lie ahead for Swiss farmers, with the 2011 agricultural policy, the WTO, bilateral agreements and the arrival on the market of the cheap discounters Aldi und Lidl. Border protection and earnings are falling whilst expectations and regulations are increasing. The following are required in order to ensure the long-term survival of Swiss farming:

1. Financial resources from the government must be maintained at least at their current level.
2. Existing measures to support the market must be continued.
3. Prices for means of production in Switzerland must be reduced.
4. Consumers must benefit from price reductions in farming.

---

*Summary of the paper presented by Hansjörg Walter,  
President of the Swiss Farmers' Union*

After the Second World War and related food shortages, priority in Switzerland was given to ensuring that there was a reliable supply of food for the population. Farmers benefited from guaranteed prices and sales and enjoyed a protected market. As time went by, ensuring a reliable supply of food became less important, and reforms were required as a result of the liberalisation of world trade as part of WTO negotiations. Consumer requirements had also changed. Today, the emphasis is on fair treatment of animals, environmentally-friendly farming and the production of healthier, safer food. Extensive agricultural reforms were introduced (2002 agricultural policy) during the first half of the nineteen nineties. Sales and price guarantees were gradually abolished and para-state organisations disbanded. At the same time, direct payments linked to ecological or animal-friendly standards were introduced. Additional steps (2007 agricultural policy) involved further deregulation of the agricultural markets in an effort to make Swiss farming more competitive. Past reforms have resulted in far-reaching changes. Since 1990, the number of farming businesses has dropped by 30 percent and the average amount of productive land per business has risen by 43 percent. What is more, Swiss farmers in general sell their produce for 3 billion francs less than at the beginning of the nineteen nineties. As well as professionalisation, agriculture has also undergone specialisation. Businesses are concentrating more on one or on no more than a few sectors and are building up production/business/sales communities. They are also occupying niche markets and producing specialities. Another consequence has been wide-ranging ecologisation. 98 percent of businesses meet the Swiss government's ecological production conditions. Numerous quality assurance systems and label schemes have made an entrance to keep up with the new developmental direction.

What role is played by farmers in Switzerland today? On the one hand, they are the producers of extremely high quality, safe foodstuffs of Swiss origin that are produced in an animal and environmentally friendly manner. In addition, they are responsible, market-oriented entrepreneurs. The combined work of farm families is also important. They create a varied landscape, provide space where people can relax and have fun, and as a result, they secure the basis for tourism. Farmers are also essential as economical and social factors in the countryside. However, despite their multifunctional role, farmers cannot help feeling worried when they think about the future. A new phase of reforms is already on its way in the shape of the 2011 agricultural policy. The WTO is insisting on abolishing border protection and internal support. Bilateral agreements with various countries (including the USA) are up for discussion, and the Swiss government must make savings and is ready to make cuts in every area of expenditure. The tensions caused between demands for increasingly lower prices on the one hand and growing legal requirements on the other are making life difficult for farmers. Various questions remain unanswered. What is the future significance of food from our own country and should it continue to be produced by family farm businesses? How important is farmland considered to be? Is the agricultural work for public benefit still desired?