

**IFAJ Congress;
Uebeschi/Thun,
31 August 2005**

*Welcome address by
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Minister of the Department of Economic Affairs*

The spoken word is definitive

<p>THE NEW ROLE OF AGRICULTURE</p>

Mr Markey
Mr. Krebs
Representatives of the agricultural press

As a Member of the Government and Minister of the Department of Economic Affairs, it gives me great pleasure to welcome you to Switzerland's most important agricultural canton. As agricultural journalists, you are reliant on farming; as a politician, I am equally reliant on journalists. I am aware that the farming community sees you as allies and I hope that as politicians we can also fulfil this role.

Even though the Canton of Berne is today a modern industrial canton with international companies such as SWATCH, E-BAY, YPSOMED and UPS, it still remains closely associated with farming.

The Canton of Berne is home to the world-famous Emmental cheese, "Hobelkäse" cheese, TÊTE DE MOINE, the Simmental cow and the Saanen goat. One in five Swiss farms is located in the Canton of Berne. This equates to a total of around 13,400 farms (of which around 12,500 are entitled to receive direct payments).

Agricultural land in the Canton of Berne, like Switzerland as a whole, is typically divided into three zones, flat land, hill zone and mountainous region, each of which has different production conditions. The flat land principally offers space for large-scale arable farming, whereas animal production is pre-eminent in the mountain region. In addition, we have all levels of employment between full-time and part-time.

More than half of the farms in our canton lie in the mountainous region, around a third in the valleys, with the remainder in the hill zone. At 14.3 hectares of useable agricultural land, the average farm size here is less than the average of over 16 hectares for Switzerland as a whole. This is mainly due to the predominance of mountain farms.

The decline in the number of farms, the structural change, is a process that is evident not only in the Canton of Berne and throughout Switzerland, but also in the rest of Europe and throughout the world. In the last ten years, the number of farms has declined by an average of 2% per annum.

A comparison with the figures for Switzerland as a whole shows that the structural change in recent years in the Canton of Berne has been much less marked. Consequently there still remains a degree of scope for cost reduction and farm growth.

The trend towards improved labour productivity in the agricultural sector, together with the structural change, may well be expected to continue unabated in the coming years as a result of the pressure exerted by WTO agreements.

In a sector with stagnant market volumes and on-going technological progress, there is a natural tendency to give up farming. For individual farms, that need not mean giving up agricultural work. On farms that are unable to generate an adequate income solely from agriculture, it will be necessary to boost labour productivity in order to free up working time with which to safeguard the economic basis through a secondary occupation.

The adjustment process is also bringing new opportunities for agriculture. As is the new role of agriculture!

It is a well-known fact that Switzerland is a small but densely populated country. The Mittelland region between Geneva and Zurich is more densely populated than the Los Angeles area! In addition to that, Switzerland is a tourist destination.

Consequently, there is a large demand for recreational space and a large and well-maintained cultivated landscape. If the cultivated landscape were not looked after, Switzerland would become covered with forests up to an altitude of 1,800 meters. If this were the case, you would be denied the wonderful view of the Bernese Alps from here (even in good weather).

This service can only be carried out by the agricultural industry and that is to say only by a productive agricultural industry! A healthy agricultural industry is therefore indis-

pensable for our country, unless we are willing to forego a dependable supply of food and, above all, the "by-products" of landscape maintenance and retention of decentralised settlement. The latter of these are especially important for our tourism. 7% of the gross domestic product (GDP) is generated in the tourism sector. In the Bernese Oberland it is as high as 27% and in the famous tourist resorts up to 90%.

The population values the contribution made by agriculture. For this reason, sparing use of natural resources (soil, water, air) and the integral agriculture-man-environment system is an important guiding principle of Switzerland's new agricultural policy.

The ecological and ethological contribution made by Bernese farmers has increased markedly in recent years, encouraged by the Federal Government and the canton. Contributions such as the upkeep of the cultivated landscape, the promotion of ecology (including biodiversity) and the exceptionally animal-friendly rearing of farm animals have been compensated with federal and cantonal subsidies. Measured in terms of ecological and ethological indicators, Bernese agriculture is on the way to sustainability.

As I indicated earlier, the population is prepared to invest money in the "by-products" of a productive agricultural industry. This is carried out in the form of direct payments.

But this does not come about by itself! Much convincing needs to be done in this area. And agricultural journalists play an immensely important role here. Without the work of your profession, it would be simply impossible to keep on providing education and information, to highlight relationships and convey the message. I would like to take advantage of this opportunity to thank you most sincerely for this eminently important support. And please bear in mind: your task will become even more important and demanding in future.

I wish you an interesting stay in the Canton of Berne and hope that you will enjoy our beautiful, richly varied countryside and agriculture and are able to return home with many unforgettable impressions.
