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Not easy being green: Rutte's eco-friendly agenda falters amid Dutch farmer backlash

Agriculture Minister Henk Staghouwer resigns after failing to get farmers on board with tough nitrogen reduction targets.



Former Dutch Agriculture Minister Henk Staghouwer at a dairy farm in Warder, the Netherlands, on August 11, 2022 | Remko de Waele/EEA

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BY BARTOSZ BRZEZINSKI AND CAMILLE GIJS

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The Dutch government is losing the battle to reduce its agricultural emissions, highlighting just how hard it is to square its green ambitions with their potential economic impacts.

On Monday, the country's Agriculture Minister Henk Staghouwer resigned just hours after agreeing with the European Commission to end an EU exemption that enabled Dutch farmers to continue spreading more manure on their fields than other EU countries.

The end of this derogation comes as Mark Rutte's government tries to push through its wider plan for reducing emissions of nitrogen, which evaporates from manure. Excessive nitrogen emissions can hurt the environment and pollute waterways, but farmers fear the measures, which will reduce the amount of fertilizer they can use, will destroy their livelihoods.

Staghouwer said he was not the "right person" to lead the "transition to circular agriculture." Rutte called his decision to step down "brave" and wished Staghouwer "every success in the future."

Carola Schouten, the deputy prime minister and fellow member of Staghouwer's Christian Union party, will take over the agriculture post for now. But the farmers, who know Schouten from her stint as agriculture minister under the previous government, said they don't expect any more progress.

"[Schouten] is invisible. She doesn't have any plans. She doesn't have any vision," said Sieta van Keimpema from the Farmers Defense Force, one of the most vocal groups in the farmer protests.

Dutch agriculture was once hailed as a model for farming, with National Geographic in 2017 dubbing the Netherlands the "tiny country that feeds the world." It's the world's second-largest exporter of agricultural goods, a massive meat producer and renowned for its use of high-tech methods to bolster yields.

But its courts decided that productivity should not come at the cost of the environment. In 2019, the Council of State, the Netherlands' highest administrative court, ruled that farming activities and construction permits violated the country's own emissions law.

"We've known about the [pollution] for at least 10 years, but because the government kept ignoring the issue, it suddenly found itself backed into a corner without a clear idea

resolve it,” said Jeroen Candel, an agricultural policy professor at Wageningen University in the Netherlands.

The new government promised to change that, even appointing a minister for “nature and nitrogen policy” to implement the reductions.

But it has struggled to match policy with its ambitions. The government’s plans have sparked protests from farmers since they were presented in June, with demonstrations only growing bigger.

With the steep targets for cutting emissions — up to 95 percent in some areas — Dutch farmers feel they will be out of a job if the measures go through, with van Keimpema previously accusing the government of trying to “wipe us off the map.”

Efforts by a government-appointed negotiator to come to an agreement have so far failed, with Staghouwer ultimately being pushed to the sidelines of the talks, according to Dutch media and Candel.

Farmers’ organizations called for a new minister to be appointed “quickly,” at a time when steep fertilizer and gas prices are already putting a squeeze on global food production.

Candel said the standoff could become a full-fledged crisis if the government fails to resolve it. “I wouldn’t be surprised if the coalition collapsed over this,” he said.

Louise Guillot contributed reporting.

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