

Down on the farm, UK energy crisis looms large

September 22 2021, by Joe Jackson



A surge in wholesale gas prices has led to a shortage of fertiliser and carbon dioxide, hitting the livestock industry and supply chains.

The tranquil landscape of flat farmland and small villages in the Essex countryside in southeast England seems a world away from Britain's

escalating energy crisis.

But fertiliser and carbon dioxide shortages are beginning to bite at places like Wicks Manor Farm, which rears pigs for pork and grows crops.

"We've got some real concerns (and) quite frightening consequences to farming, as an industry throughout the UK, certainly to our farming business here," owner Fergus Howie told AFP, barely audible over his pigs' squeals.

"There's a lot of issues and they're all kind of coming together," he added, saying the situation had prompted "real concerns" about the "immediate food supply chain".

Howie's farm and butchery, in the idyllic Essex countryside some 50 miles (80 kilometres) northeast of London, sells pork to leading supermarkets, restaurants, cafes, and for export.

Wheat and barley grown over 4,400 acres (nearly 11,000 hectares) are used to feed the animals and sold wholesale.

Fertiliser is needed for the crops, and CO₂ for the humane slaughter of livestock, as well as in the production and packaging of sausages, burgers, bacon and ham.

If the shortages continue, there are fears farms like Wicks Manor could be left unable to cull animals and low yield harvests will be economically unviable.



Production of fertiliser relies on natural gas. CO₂, its by-product, is used to stun animals before slaughter.

'Crazy'

Britain is not alone in being hit by surging [gas prices](#), caused by a global supply shortage, causing a spike in wholesale costs that threaten to hike bills for consumers.

But the sharp increase led two UK fertiliser production sites, which rely on natural gas to halt operations last week, with a knock-on effect on livestock farming and the supply chain.

Carbon dioxide is a by-product of fertiliser production and the two

plants account for up to 60 percent of Britain's CO₂ supply.

Farmers like Howie now worry there will not be enough to go round.

The UK government announced Tuesday a financial support deal with CF Fertilisers, the US firm that runs the biggest of the two facilities, to restart production at one site.

But the agreement, which ministers concede could end up costing British taxpayers tens of millions of pounds, will only last for three weeks—and produce a fraction of the CO₂ needed.



Two UK fertiliser production plants shut down because of the surge in wholesale gas prices.

"Three weeks isn't exactly going to cut the mustard," said Howie, whose grandfather began farming in Essex nearly a century ago.

"It's been a real surprise to the industry... how important these two plants in the UK are to the food chain that we all need to have food available in our shops.

"It's crazy that there are only two plants, it's crazy that they are both under [foreign investment](#)."

'Welfare issues'

Wicks Manor Farm, which opened in its current form in 1967, typically has up to 3,000 pigs on-site, including some 250 sows giving birth year-round.

It sends around 110 animals to slaughter every Friday, freeing up space in its open strawed yards for new piglets.

On Wednesday, 20 pens housing newly-born suckling piglets were full. In five weeks, they will move out into the bigger yards—if there is space.



Business Secretary Kwasi Kwarteng has signed a deal to enable the plants to restart production for three weeks.

"We need to have pigs go off so that we have got room for those new animals to come into the farm environment," said Howie.

"Welfare issues will become quite significant if abattoirs say they're stopping because these two plants have stopped production."

Before the CO₂ crisis, Howie was already sending 25 percent fewer pigs to slaughter due to chronic staff shortages at abattoirs caused by a "double whammy" of Brexit and the pandemic.

He said Britain has long been too reliant on eastern European labour that

is now disappearing and subject to tougher post-Brexit immigration requirements.

Short-term, he wants the government to secure "consistency of supply" for both fertiliser and CO₂, before tackling the longer-term problems around resilience.

"We need to start looking at why we have such a fragile food supply chain in the UK," the 46-year-old said, urging "investment in more plants (and) different technologies so we don't rely on [natural gas](#)" and imports.



Supermarkets have seen empty shelves due to a shortage of certain foods, exacerbated by the gas crisis, as well as a lack of lorry drivers post-Brexit.



An inability to slaughter animals will create welfare issues, farmers say.



Farmers say the crisis has shown the fragility of the food supply chain in the UK.

If the government fails to address the issues adequately, the father-of-three fears for the future of his family-run firm.

"When you're running a farming business for three generations, there's a lot of passion, a lot of involvement," he said.

"We've got to make sure that we have something that hopefully we can pass to the next generation—we don't want to be the ones that trip over holding it."

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Citation: Down on the farm, UK energy crisis looms large (2021, September 22) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://techxplore.com/news/2021-09-farm-uk-energy-crisis-looms.html>

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