

2 June, 2010
Reykjavík, ICELAND

Announcement from the Farmers Association of Iceland to its affiliated associations, partners and friends

The volcanic eruption in Iceland and its effects on Icelandic agriculture – The aftermath

The eruption of Eyjafjallajökull, which began on 14 April, has now subsided. Volcanic materials are no longer erupting from the crater and farmers in the affected areas are hoping that the ash fall and the resulting inconvenience will soon be over. However, scientists believe it is too early to confirm that the eruption is at an end. Farmers in the area are facing a lot of work to rebuild and get life back to normal. Ash has polluted the lowland countryside in the region as well as grazing fields in the mountains. Airborne ash and dust pollution will significantly impact daily life and productive farming will be difficult in the coming months and perhaps years. Risk of mud flooding is also significant in some areas closest to the glacier. The area directly affected by the eruption amounts to approximately 5000 square kilometres and has around 150 farms and close to 500 inhabitants. There are 10,000 cattle, around 20,000 sheep and 7,000 horses in the vicinity of Eyjafjallajökull glacier.

In the middle of May, before the crater fell silent, twenty agricultural advisors visited 120 farms in the affected part of the country. They talked to farmers in order to evaluate the situation and the need for assistance when it comes to acquiring feed and grazing this spring and summer. According to the advisors the area has sufficient feed in stock to last for some weeks at least. The following were deemed the most important reactions:

- Providing grazing lands for sheep outside the area most affected by the ash fall.
- Planning for the transportation of livestock and feed between areas.
- Providing barns for cattle, giving farmers the alternative of moving the animals away from the hardest hit areas.
- Establishing a substitute farm worker program to allow farmers to take holidays away from the area.
- Planning local initiatives to help farmers to be able to leave their farms for shorter periods.
- Creating an organised hay distribution system and planning to obtain feed.
- Speeding up information on the results of chemical analyses of the effects of fluoride on grazing fields.

- Ensuring that financial institutions take into account the hardships of farmers in the eruption area.

In the past few weeks farmers and local authorities in the ash-affected region, have been working on various solutions to the problems caused by the eruption. Sheep and horses have been transported away from the region to places where ash pollution is not a problem. This transportation has been a success and farmers in other areas have been helpful and willing to give access to their own farmlands. Some cattle farmers have decided to move their cattle away from the region and the Minister of Agricultural Affairs has initiated regulatory changes allowing farmers to take a break from farming while still benefitting from direct payments from the authorities.

The need for rest

Farmers in the area have been working long hours since the eruption broke out and are in need of rest. Some families have opted to move children out of the region due to the ash pollution. Plans to provide substitute farm workers are being carried out. The authorities have pledged assistance on this issue and recently a recruitment effort was put in motion, with 70 people performing various tasks in the eruption areas, including helping farmers directly. The Farmers Association of Iceland's holiday fund has advertised special benefits for farmers from the affected areas and urged them to go on vacation with their families.

Gathering feed - hay banks

It is estimated that around 10-15 thousand round bales of hay will need to be shipped into the affected region by the end of summer, as gathering hay there will be impossible due to the ash. Local government, in cooperation with the Farmers Association, have already made plans for hay banks and requested donations of feed from other parts of the country. Farmers are hopeful that sufficient feed for winter will be acquired but they are aware that they might need to buy more compound feed than usual.

Financial loss

Farmers' losses as a result of the eruption have yet to be fully quantified. On some farms, where farming has had to stop for some time, the financial damage is considerable. Farmers are partially insured against natural disasters, such as eruptions, and they themselves have also contributed to a common fund for many years. The authorities have also decided to add to the fund in order to help cover potential losses. Despite these efforts, the damage will obviously never be compensated completely and the loss of income will prove difficult for many families. These problems are only compounded by the recent economic crisis and the subsequent devaluing of the Icelandic Króna. Therefore financial institutions have been asked to show leniency to farmers in the affected areas in their debt collection practices. It has not been necessary to slaughter livestock due to the eruption and farmers are hoping for relatively minor loss of production.

The region is a popular tourist destination and farmers offering tourism services will no doubt feel the blow of decreased business this summer due to the disaster. The Farmers Association of Norway and several Norwegian agricultural companies have joined together in support of Icelandic farmers affected by the eruption. This is in addition to general Norwegian fundraising efforts. All funds raised will enable families to start the restoration process on their lands and to take a holiday away from the ash.

The next steps

Farmers are currently getting their usual spring work done, which has been delayed because of the eruption. There is considerable uncertainty ahead as it is unknown whether the eruption has ended for good. In the next few weeks the farmers will work on acquiring feed for winter, cleaning up their grounds and transporting livestock away from the hardest hit regions. As a result of the dust and ash pollution it will be hard for people and livestock to stay in the areas worst affected by the disaster. In light of this the authorities have made an effort to provide housing in the neighbouring towns and villages unaffected by the polluted air.

Icelandic farmers are grateful

Farmers in Iceland would like to thank their numerous supporters for their moral and physical support during the weeks since the eruption broke out. Special thanks are reserved for Norwegian farmers as well as farmers' associations around the world for their kind messages of support.

These events have highlighted the importance of farming, animal welfare and food production in Iceland. The Icelandic people are very supportive of domestic food production and farmers appreciate that. The Farmers Association has also welcomed the initiative of the government and the clear desire of the authorities to support the people of the region following the disaster.

*Sincerely, Haraldur Benediktsson,
chairman of the Farmers Association of Iceland*

For further information, please don't hesitate to contact.

More photos at:

<http://picasaweb.google.com/100655564116735819087/GosslolrEyjafjollAlftaverOgMeAlland30Mai2010#>

Please send an email to tjorvi@bondi.is if photos in better resolution is needed.

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The eruption plume was only a few kilometres away from some of Iceland's best farming lands.





Hay gathering this summer will not be easy as the ash sets in the grass and whirls into the air when hay-gathering machines are driven over the fields.





Suspended particulates and ash are blown across large areas, making life difficult for people and livestock.





Farmers in the area have been working long hours since the eruption broke out and are in need of rest. Here is farmer Grétar Óskarsson at Seljavellir while the crater blows ashes over his farmland.

