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MENTAL DISTRESS FOR EUROPEAN FARMERS, THE UNSEEN MOTIVATION FOR THEIR PROTESTS



The **farmers' protests across Europe** are headline news these days, with **hundreds of tractors blocking traffic** in major European cities, exhausted after years of **green policies** undermining the survival of their activities. But there's a lesser-known reason for such action. **Research has shown** that the **pressures on farmers over the years** have also significantly **negatively impacted their health and mental well-being**. This is very worrying but totally understandable. In many cases,

their daily job is an activity that has been handed down for generations, and **the risk of failure creates a lot of mental stress** in addition to the myriad difficulties the sector has been experiencing recently.

Farms have belonged to these families for generations, but **European policies** often do little to **protect their incomes**, creating **financial insecurity** and forcing many farms to close. With some **seriously considering suicide**, the situation is more dramatic than anyone might think. A 2023 **survey** of more than **250 Irish farmers** found that **20% had considered suicide in the previous two weeks**, while **almost 40% reported moderate to extremely high levels of stress**. In **northern Belgium**, almost **half of the 600 farmers surveyed** said their work was a cause of **psychological distress**. More than a **quarter of German and Austrian farmers** reported experiencing **burnout**, twice the general population's rate for burnout.

The sense of powerlessness, oppression and injustice can be unbearable

Farmers report feeling completely crushed by **climate policies** that **unfairly label them as the planet's main polluters**. The **increase in costs**, the **fall in selling prices**, and the **overly rigid and unfair rules** governing their work are also **inevitably damaging their mental health**. The sense of **powerlessness, oppression and injustice** is reported to have become unbearable for many, in the face of the headlines painting the agricultural sector as the main cause of **global warming** and **loss of biodiversity**. The farming sector, just like many other sectors, knows it must reduce impacts on the environment. In this respect, **livestock farming has shown success in reducing emissions**. But these **improvements should not be undermined by making their work impossible**. After all, the farmers are the ones putting the food on our supermarket shelves.

Farmers are at the forefront of the fight against climate change

Farmers are at the forefront of the fight against **climate change** and are also one of the most affected by it. But, the unsustainable rise in costs, **ever-stricter regulations** on emissions and restrictions on the use of various inputs, **negative media portrayals** and the **removal of subsidies for agricultural fuel** have eroded any respect for their fundamental role as **guardians of the land and suppliers of food**. After the Second World War, farmers were told to give it their all to **end hunger** and secure our food supply. Today, however, they are **constantly criticised** and **labelled as polluters** and **torturers of animals**. This kind of constant criticism would be exhausting for anyone.

“They feel that they have been **scapegoated in terms of being a headline** as if they are causing the **climate crisis** disproportionately beyond their role,” **said Louise McHugh**, professor of psychology at **University College Dublin** and co-lead of the **mental health study on Irish farmers**. McHugh says farmers she spoke to as part of her study were **motivated to engage in innovative practices and policies** that addressed climate change but felt **these needed to include their voices** and, crucially, be workable on the ground. Researchers say solutions and **more support for farmers’ mental health** need to be found. In Ireland, they’ve already started by offering mental health modules **to students** studying agricultural sciences.

According to **Franziska Aumer**, who is studying to become a **dairy farmer** in Bavaria, Germany, it is also **important to ensure that farmers have more information and opportunities for dialogue**. Franziska said that a Dutch friend of hers **took his own life at the age of 25 after losing his farm**, like many others in the Netherlands, **due to stricter nitrogen emission standards**. “He was full of life. He fought for his farm for years”, Aumer said. Despite the **tragic stories** she has experienced and the **challenges** facing the sector, Aumer said **giving up is not an option** for her. **“I hope that politicians and society will appreciate us** and that they’ll offer us support so that our profession has a future. And so that it doesn’t break people.”

