

## Taiwan must secure its food supply

Written by Eugene Yen 葉宜

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Drought and wildfires have caused a 20 percent drop in Russia's wheat harvest this year, prompting the Russian authorities to ban cereal exports. The export ban has sent global grain prices soaring, bringing concerns about food security to the fore once more.

It is ironic, then, that farmlands in Dapu Village (大埔) in Miaoli County's Jhunan Township (竹南) along with the Siangsi-liao (香西寮) area of Changhua County's Erlin Township (二林) are being expropriated for conversion to industrial use. This whittling away of fertile land is a long-term trend, but Taiwan's government has not paid much attention to it.

The export ban by Russia, the world's fourth-biggest grain exporter, is an alarm signal for global food security. The world's food supply faces two great challenges: The first is population growth and the second is climate change and extreme weather.

Washington-based non-profit organization the Population Reference Bureau estimates that the world's population will exceed 9 billion by 2050. Between 1950 and 1990, global food production increased more or less in tandem with population growth, so there was enough food to go around. However, from 2000 onward, while the population has continued growing, food production has almost leveled off.

Ten years ago global food reserves were sufficient to feed everyone on the planet for 150 days, but now stocks have fallen to just over one-third of that. We are moving toward a situation where food supply cannot meet demand, so international food prices are bound to rise.

Global warming and extreme weather are also grave threats. A research report by the International Rice Research Institute in 2004 says rice production falls by 10 percent for every 1°C rise in temperature. In the year the report was published, grain production in three major East Asian countries — China, Japan and South Korea — fell sharply, mainly because of a rise in ozone density since 1990.

Regarding extreme weather, the fall in wheat output brought about by the drought in Russia is by no means an isolated case. In its Crop Prospects and Food Situation bulletin this year, the UN Food and Agricultural Organization lists the Philippines, Bangladesh, China, Nepal and Iraq as countries that may need to import more staple foods because of drought.

In preparation for a possible global food crisis, a wave of "neocolonialism" has arisen as investors rush to buy up farmland in other countries. UN estimates show that up until the first half of last year, 74 million hectares of arable land in developing countries had been bought up by foreigners — equal to half the arable land in Europe.

In recent years Taiwan's neighbors Japan, South Korea and China have been buying up farmland in Africa, Latin America and South and Southeast Asia, as have Middle Eastern

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countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. Investment in farmland and food production has become a hot new target for investors around the world, and this inflow of capital accounts to some extent for the steep rise in global food prices in 2008.

In contrast with the rush to invest in farmland in many countries, the compulsory purchase of farmland for industrial purposes in Dapu and Erlin shows that Taiwan's government is going against the trend.

Our government is not only failing to conserve arable land, but has been the chief culprit in destroying it. Discussion of the recent clashes over land seizures has focused on the conflict between industrial and environmental policies, while the fact that agriculture is also a productive sector has been largely overlooked.

Although agriculture accounts for less than 2 percent of Taiwan's GDP, the looming global food shortage and the inevitable long-term trend for food prices to rise make agriculture a rising-star sector of the economy.

In view of this, the government's emphasis on industrial production and its lack of attention to agriculture reveals a serious lack of foresight.

The government needs a sense of urgency about food security and it should formulate a long-term strategy to deal with possible crises.

At present, Taiwan is only 30 percent self-sufficient in staple foods. If the world is struck by a serious food shortage and other food-exporting countries follow Russia's example of banning exports, Taiwan will be badly hit.

Faced with such a nightmare scenario, Taiwan can't afford not to prepare for the worst.

Eugene Yen is a part-time assistant professor at Shih Chien University's School of Liberal Education.

TRANSLATED BY JULIAN CLEGG

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