

Taiwan agriculture needs fresh vision

Written by Taiwan News Editorial
Wednesday, 14 July 2010 09:25

In the wake of the signing of the controversial "Cross-strait Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement" with the authoritarian People's Republic of China, President Ma Ying-jeou and his Kuomintang government have maintained that they refuted the warnings of critics and "held the line" on the defense of Taiwan's agriculture.

This claim has some justice since the new pact's early harvest lists did not grant the PRC any concessions on the 830 agricultural produce categories in which imports from China are banned nor any reductions in tariff protection for 1,415 produce types whose importation from China is already allowed under the terms of our entry into the World Trade Organization in early 2002, secured tariff cuts for 18 types of agricultural and fishery produce from Taiwan.

Nevertheless, the "holding of the line" on Taiwan's agricultural import barriers in this or future E CFA talks will be insufficient to truly "defend" Taiwan's agriculture from the impact of freer trade and investment ties with the PRC.

The inconvenient fact is that the fundamental threat posed by the PRC market to Taiwan's agriculture takes the form not of direct sales to Taiwan's domestic market but its vigorous promotion of "cross-strait agricultural cooperation" with special zones and programs all over China that employ abundant capital and visions of large scale and low-wage production to entice Taiwan cooperatives and farmers to "share" our accumulated knowhow and "cooperate" with Chinese farms to grow and process low-price produce that will ultimately undercut Taiwan farmers on world and home markets.

"Cross-strait agricultural cooperation" may benefit some Taiwan business and farmers but will ultimately undermine Taiwan's agriculture with grave side-effects that will be detrimental to food security and the quality and equity of life in Taiwan.

Besides the need to provide stable employment for Taiwan's farmers, our government policy makers should consider the growing uncertainties on world food markets caused by global climatic change, rising populations and demands in developing nations including China and India and ecological pressures on arable land and elevate the priority of national food security and ensure that Taiwan farmers will be able to supply the bulk of our people's basic food requirements.

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So far, the main policy program launched by the Ma government in the agricultural sector is embodied in the draft controversial "Statute for the Revitalization of Rural Villages," which will invest up to NT\$150 billion in rural infrastructure construction and may "revitalize" rural land speculation but will provide scant help in reinvigorating Taiwan's agriculture.

However, the real attitude of the KMT government toward Taiwan's agriculture has been starkly displayed by the heavy-handed takeover of 28 hectares of prime farmland in Tapu Village near Chunan Township to build a new industrial park for the sake of the same Hon Hai Group which has earned a name in China for "sweat and blood shop" factory operations.

Such events are likely to multiply throughout Taiwan in the wake of the imminent ratification of ECFA is rubber stamped by the KMT controlled Legislature.

Yunlin-Chiayi initiative

Instead, what Taiwan needs now is the initiation of a robustly financed and staffed and multifaceted national effort to reinvigorate agriculture instead of simply revitalizing property markets in rural areas or pursuing "cost-down" tariff cuts.

Key priorities should include measures to assist Taiwan farmers enhance "non-price" competitiveness through innovation in breeding and marketing, provision of logistic support, expansion of marketing channels, especially to more sophisticated and quality and safety conscious consumer markets in Japan and other advanced nations, protection of farmer organizations and farmer production and the implementation of a land development planning system that addresses the needs of reviving agriculture in an environmentally - friendly manner.

In this line, the initiative by DPP Yunlin County Commissioner and Chiayi County Commissioner Chang Kuan-hua Sunday to call on the KMT government to invest NT\$30 billion to help the two counties revitalize their agricultural sectors through establishing a "national - class agricultural base" should be welcomed.

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Besides its modest price tag of NT\$30 billion, the program outlined by the two DPP mayors reflects a broad consensus of economically innovative and feasible, socially progressive and environmental friendly concepts that offer far more genuine hope to revive Taiwan's agriculture and improve the quality and living standards in rural areas and attract and retain both investment and youthful energies.

Moreover, as Su told media last week, the funds and resources devoted to the Yunlin-Chiayi national agricultural base scheme would not be a form of "social welfare" but would be an investment in helping Taiwan farmers break through long-established "bottlenecks" that have shackled Taiwan's farmers.

The Yunlin-Chiayi program would aim to build Taiwan's first world-class agricultural produce logistic and warehousing center, help deal with the decades-long atomized state of farmland and water rights by brokering cooperative efforts to achieve modest economies of scale, directly supporting farmer and cooperative efforts to expand marketing and build brand name and quality products and elevating the international name recognition of Taiwan produce with a 2013 global exhibition.

It's time that Taiwan remembered our farmers and repaid the debt we owe them and ourselves.

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