

Government must protect farmland

Written by Du Yu 杜宇

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Taiwan is founded on farming, indeed the development of human civilization has relied on advances in agriculture. It is important that agricultural reform policies are well thought through, so that one false move does not set off a destructive chain reaction.

Many governments have come to grief throughout history because of food shortages, yet the Council of Agriculture has introduced a string of major policies: opening Taiwan up to imports of US beef injected with ractopamine; canceling inoculations against foot-and-mouth disease; establishing agricultural distribution centers in free economic demonstration zones; massively deregulating Chinese investment in Taiwanese agriculture; and opening up designated agricultural areas for electricity generation.

The government, having failed to communicate its policies, has left farmers with the impression that it intends to leave the agricultural industry by the wayside. It has reinforced the suspicions among agricultural non-governmental organizations that the government intends to get rid of farming altogether.

Economically advanced countries and areas such as the US and the EU adopt strict rules and regulations aimed at ensuring the availability of agriculturally productive land and regulating changes made to it. These countries provide considerable farming subsidies as an incentive for people to work in the sector.

They also regard food as part of the state's strategic armory, and think very carefully before allowing overseas input.

In the US, for example, many states — such as Iowa, Missouri and Wisconsin — have laws explicitly prohibiting foreign investor ownership of farmland. While the Chinese company Shuanghui International has announced it would buy Smithfield Foods — the world's largest seller of processed pork products — the acquisition must first pass a US federal government committee review charged with evaluating national security risks.

Former US secretary of state Henry Kissinger said that whoever controls the food supply controls the people. Clearly, agriculture is regarded as important in the US. Taiwan's

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government — even when we have a food self-sufficiency rate of only 32 percent — is still countenancing certain departments which, in the name of promoting economic development, are sequestering huge swathes of prime farmland for industrial parks, business parks, science parks and biotech parks.

Taiwan is hemorrhaging an average of almost 10,000 hectares a year, so that it only has isolated pockets of farmland here and there, with none of the uninterrupted stretches of land devoted to farming that the nation used to have. Also, much of the water supply previously allocated for agricultural use has been diverted to industry, making farming an even more precarious prospect.

This is why the appropriation of the local water supply for the fourth phase expansion of the Central Taiwan Science Park met with such anger from farmers.

Taiwan imports more than 90 percent of its energy. It is imperative that we develop new alternative energy sources and a comprehensive energy resource development policy. Solar energy is one possibility. The success of the Aqua Solar Farm program in Pingtung County is evidence.

It would be a good idea to use land for electricity generation in areas that receive plentiful sunlight, but are prone to land subsidence and unsuitable for agricultural use. Farmers with relatively low incomes should be encouraged to explore alternative sources of revenue through policy incentives such as increasing the resale price of electricity and providing low-interest financing loans and

The problem is that when there are already 200,000 hectares of farmland lying fallow, the government has surprisingly allowed 330,000 hectares of prime farmland previously zoned exclusively for agricultural use — land prioritized as farmland or on which there has previously been significant investment on improving agricultural facilities — to now be developed for electricity generation.

There are no support plans in place, nor have detailed evaluations been carried out, or have the authorities communicated well with farmers' groups on these moves.

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All of this is sure to be detrimental to Taiwan's long-term grain storage and production capacity, irrigation systems and peripheral facilities, which is bad news for our food self-sufficiency rate and for soil and water conservation.

High investment costs for developing these electricity generation facilities are way above what ordinary farmers are able to afford. It is not surprising that many environmentalists suspect corporate groups are hiding behind promises of developing green energy solutions simply to get their hands on land that they intend to use other than for electricity generation.

Once farmland has been lost, it is very difficult to get back. People will find it very difficult to get by in a food shortage crises. The government, in its incompetence, is looking out for the interests of the few, but it will be the whole country that ends up paying the price.

Prime farmland is not the best option for building solar energy generators. If this government policy is implemented it will have far-reaching repercussions for Taiwan's development and survival.

Taiwan is poised to go down a path of no return, and we cannot just stand idly by.

We need to demand that the government pulls back on the reins, so that it does not jeopardize the future.

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Translated by Paul Cooper

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