

'French farmers and the Mansholt Plan', from 30 jours d'Europe (February 1971)

Caption: In February 1971, the monthly publication 30 jours d'Europe comments on a survey of French farmers' opinions of the Mansholt Plan.

Source: 30 jours d'Europe. dir. de publ. FONTAINE, François ; Réd. Chef CHASTENET, Antoine. Février 1971, n° 151. Paris: Service d'information des Communautés européennes. "Les exploitants agricoles face au Plan Mansholt", p. 12.

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French farmers and the Mansholt Plan

Sixty-three per cent say French farms are too small to be profitable

Sixty-three per cent of French farmers claim that ‘most farms are too small to be profitable’, and only 13 % are aware that the Mansholt Plan is a plan to modernise European farming. These and other responses are compiled in a survey, which we publish in full below, carried out by SEMA-SOFRES using a representative sample of some 1 350 million French farmers.

In general, French farmers appear to be well informed. More than three quarters, or 77 %, of them have heard of the Mansholt Plan. The percentage is considerably higher among young people and farmers with holdings larger than 20 hectares. Sixty-six per cent of those familiar with the Mansholt Plan regard it as a strategy to reduce the number of farmers in Europe. Only 13 % are aware that it is a plan to modernise European agriculture.

Poor structural adaptation

While, on the whole, unfavourable opinions of the Mansholt Plan outnumber favourable ones by 52 % to 32 %, there are differences according to age, acreage and region. Among the younger farmers, those for and against are tied at 47 %. The proportion of favourable responses falls with age and reaches a low point of 21 % in farmers aged 65 and older.

Despite taking a cautious and disapproving attitude, farmers nevertheless appear to be aware of the poor structural adaptation affecting French agriculture. While the vast majority, 71 % compared to 22 %, refuse to acknowledge that ‘there are far too many farmers in France’, and that ‘there is too much land under cultivation’, more than six out of ten (63 %) maintain that ‘most French farms are too small to be profitable’. In other words, French farmers are clearly aware of the effects of structural deficiencies, such as low profitability and insufficient income, but they fail to recognise the causes, i.e. an excessively large labour force and the growing of crops on marginal land.

In response to the question, *What is most likely to happen to your farm when you retire?*, a majority of 47 % stated their intention to transfer it intact to another person, 14 % thought the farm would no longer exist, 8 % thought it would be incorporated into a larger structure made up of several farms, and 26 % expressed no opinion. Here again, the older farmers, more so than the younger ones, want to transfer their holding intact. While it is perhaps to be expected that 52 % of farmers with more than 50 hectares would want to sell their farm in one piece, it is surprising to see that 44 % of those with less than 10 hectares hold the same opinion.

Mr Mansholt was being very optimistic when he proposed an annuity of just over half a million old French francs to farmers willing to stop working the land. Forty-eight per cent showed no interest in the offer, and 13 % expressed no opinion. Forty-two per cent of farmers questioned expressed little interest in such an annuity because the amount on offer is too low, 35 % stated they wanted to preserve their holding as it is, and 30 % said they wanted to continue working beyond age 55.

A conservative attitude

Commenting on the results of the survey, Mr Mansholt said: ‘The farmers’ good sense has led them to recognise that, in general, most farms are too small to be profitable and that farming structures are poorly adapted. But, when the time comes to look for the causes and solutions, their fear of any change in their personal situation, the advantages of which they fail to see, causes them to take a conservative attitude.

‘Helping farmers to examine their individual situations and the real solutions being offered is a fundamental task that ought to be taken on by socio-economic advisers who should be available to help farmers. But the future of farming does not only depend on legal texts and the support offered to farmers; the farmers themselves have to be resourceful and make the best use of these two instruments.’