

# DOSSIER

## Charting the Future of French Farming

### Introduction

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Farmers still count for a lot in France, despite their shrinking numbers. Scarcely four per cent of the workforce now earns a living in agriculture. Yet, every politician knows that the country has a huge stake in farming—France is second only to the United States as an agricultural exporter—and that farmer unions wield clout. Farmers have cultural leverage as well. Rolling fields and rural hamlets still figure prominently in most people's mental image of what makes France French and its social fabric whole.

Even so, the future for many farmers is anything but secure. Global competition, EU enlargement, and scientific advances will continue to reshape the conditions of agricultural production and marketing. Farm subsidies could well diminish under pressure from trade negotiators or from voters at home who wish to put tax revenues to other purposes. Many a small family farm could go under for lack of young men and women willing to wager their futures on a farming career. Meanwhile, big growers will no doubt find ways to raise more food on less land with fewer hands. Ineluctable though these trends may be, however, French farmers have an impressive record of fighting back in the face of adversity. Their militance, combined with a strong tradition of state protection and public pride in the land and its products, make it certain that agriculture will remain one of the more important, and contentious, arenas of debate in the new century.

The authors of the three articles assembled here bring a rare combination of experience and expertise to an inquiry into how the French are trying to shape the future of farming in France. Susan Carol Rogers, an anthropologist at New York University, has done extensive ethnographic fieldwork since the 1970s in several rural regions of France. Her interest in cross-national differences in dominant beliefs and effective rhetorical strategies regarding farming was first piqued by her experience on the staff of the US House and Senate Agriculture committees (1983-4). She opens our "dossier" with an article ana-

lyzing why during the 1990s key opinion makers in France on matters agricultural put such a premium on preserving small farms and a cultivated landscape. By drawing comparisons with the United States, where in structural terms agriculture holds a position in the economy similar to what it does in France, Rogers shows how pivotal culture can be in shaping the way agriculture is organized and the land managed.

François Clerc offers the perspective of an erudite policy-making insider. An alumnus of the Institut national agronomique, Clerc has worked for four decades at a number of key strategic sites where much of the current framework of policy emerged for French agriculture. Having begun his career in the 1950s as a civil servant in the French Ministry of Agriculture, working on rural development in Morocco, he spent much of the 1960s in Brussels, helping to shape the EEC's Common Agricultural Program. After subsequent service at the FNSEA (Fédération nationale des syndicats exploitants agricoles) and the Caisse nationale du Crédit Agricole, he returned to the Ministry of Agriculture where in the 1980s he was chief of the information service and then regional director of agriculture and forests in the Île-de-France. He has written widely on agriculture and more recently on the environment. With first-hand knowledge of nearly every major institution in France and Brussels impinging on agriculture he provides us here with a survey of the major issues facing farmers today.

Bertrand Hervieu concludes our "dossier" with a close analysis of the most important piece of agricultural legislation the French parliament has passed in recent years, the 1999 "Loi d'orientation agricole," which he drafted while serving for two years as technical advisor to the Minister of Agriculture in the late 1990s. Like Clerc, Hervieu bridges the world of policy making and scholarship, although he does so as an academic rather than as a professional civil servant. He began his career in the 1970s as a rural sociologist and has since remained one of the most widely read analysts of agricultural issues in France. In the mid-1980s he was a technical advisor to Agricultural Minister Maurice Nallet and then later advised Prime Minister Edith Cresson on rural questions in 1991-92. Since then he has served as a *directeur de recherche* at the Centre d'étude de la vie politique française (CNRS) and has recently been named President of the Institut national de la recherche agronomique, the leading research institute of agricultural sciences in France. His appointment to this latter position, until now usually held by a scientist, suggests how important the social (and social scientific) dimension of agriculture has become in contemporary France.

The Editor