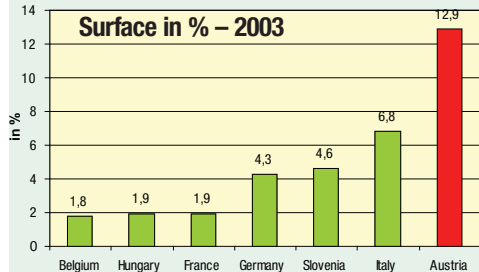


Austrian farmers tap into green boom

Renewable energy has provided an economic boon for European farming communities, as the recent International Federation of Agricultural Journalists Congress tour of Austria discovered. Back from Europe, **CATHERINE MILLER** examines the benefits arising for Austrian farmers

Organic farming



Quality wins over quantity

CENTRAL European farmers often refer to themselves by saying 'good things coming in small packages', with a concerted focus towards quality over quantity.

But to their Australian counterparts, farming in Austria or Slovenia would feel more like spending the afternoon tending the backyard – with cow herds small enough to name individual breeders and perfect rows of maize sown with 'toy' tractors.

The average Austrian farm size is under 20 hectares.

Further south in one of the newer European Union member countries, Slovenia it is 6.3 hectares of utilised farm area.

But with further land purchases valued in euros per square metre and well out of reach of most, it is just accepted that over half of farming businesses need off-farm bread winners.

As in Australia, there is a growing trend by innovative European farmers to instead value-add to maximise their returns.

Agriculture subsidies from the EU are definitely the lifeline for most European farmers, with the annual bill a colossal 47 billion euros across 27 member states.

But it is not just a free handout with tight environmental protocols (lamb-thieving wolves are protected) and requirements to maintain the aesthetics of the European landscape.

And with Austria famous as the home of the Alps and some 40 percent of the land area classified as mountainous, incentives are needed to keep farmers tending almost vertical slopes.

There have been changes in the EU's common agricultural policy legislation giving farmers greater choice to make production decisions based on market demands.

Despite farms passed down for up to ten generations and beyond, it is interesting European farmers really see themselves as custodians of the land and have a strong ethos to work in harmony with nature.

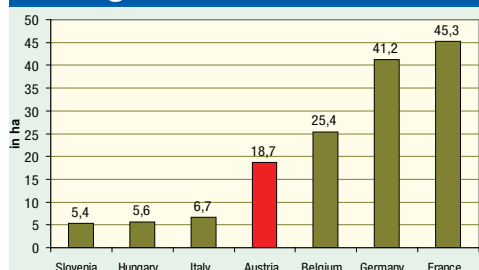
Austria has the largest number of organic farms in the EU – one in every ten – and there is tremendous pride in producing the highest quality produce possible.

Interestingly, while agriculture makes up just 2pc of the gross domestic product of Austria and Slovenia, the role of farmers in ensuring the food self sufficiency of the country is highly valued by both the urban dwellers and governments.

Perhaps this has something to do with the European culture of 'living to eat' rather than 'eating to live'.

There is an important lesson that while European and Australian agriculture may be worlds apart in scale, education is the key for the wider community to understand and appreciate the economy begins with farmers who feed and clothe the world – something which is often forgotten in Australia.

Average farm size 2003



THE European Union's push towards using renewable energy is giving farmers new opportunities to make money turning their oilseed crops and forest plantations into green electricity and biofuels.

The EU leads the world in the development of the biodiesel sector and in Austria there are currently eight large scale and two small-scale biodiesel plants, with a total capacity of more than 140,000 tonnes.

It is part of the country's push to position farmers as providers of reliable and secure heat from regional and sustainable biomass, achieving the target of 23 per cent renewable energy use by 2020.

The small town of Gussing, which was part of the recent International Federation of Agricultural Journalists Congress tour, was the first town in the EU to meet its own energy demands, utilising the large areas of maize grown and wood chips from the area's extensive forests.

The town of 4000 inhabitants and the surrounding district have undergone a remarkable economic recovery in the past 20 years, moving from fossil fuels to renewable energy.

Originally one of Austria's poorest regions, near the Hungarian border, it had no industry and high rates of unemployment with about 70pc of its residents forced to commute for work.

In 1988 the agricultural area could barely afford its annual fuel bill of 6 million euros.

But Gussing is now the European centre for renewable energy and since 2001, with the establishment of a biomass plant, has become self-sufficient for its heating and electricity.

With a collaborative effort between the government, farmers and foresters and the local community Gussing now feeds power into the grid and has a surplus income of 13 million euro, which stays in the area.

Its residents have also enjoyed a 30 per cent saving in heating costs and within six years it hopes to be self-sufficient in fuel.

The most important innovation is the biomass plant which has a fuel capacity of 8 megawatts and produces 2000kWh electric power as well as 4500kWh heat, operating for about 8000 hours per year.

Styrian Chamber of Agriculture and Forestry's Christian Metschina says the EU has been a strong supporter of renewable energy with initial investment subsidies of 20 to 25 percent of project costs and pure biofuels produced from oilseeds such as rape, sunflowers and soybeans exempt from mineral oil tax.

And while he says there is widespread discussion in Europe about biofuels pushing food prices up, he says just 1.5 percent of Europe's maize production is used for fuel production.

• Catherine Miller attended the IFAJ Congress courtesy of Alltech. See next week's *Stock Journal* for more from Europe.



ENERGY ECONOMICS (above): Gussing biomass plant which produces 2000kWh of electric power, plus 4500kWh for district heating.



MAIZE MONEY (inset right): Gussing is located in a large maize growing area in Austria with about 50 farmers holding long-term contracts to supply their crops for renewable energy production.



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