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Cattle breeding in southern Poland and recent changes in Polish agriculture

The political and economic transformations which started at the beginning of 1990s significantly changed the situation of the Polish countryside and Polish agriculture.

State Farms (situated mainly in western and northern part of the country) were liquidated and their land was, to a large extent, privatised. All farms were faced with competition from (often subsidized) goods imported from abroad. Agricultural production became less profitable.

In the last 13 years:

- The area of agriculture land decreased by 982,5000 ha (5,5%) (see Fig.1);

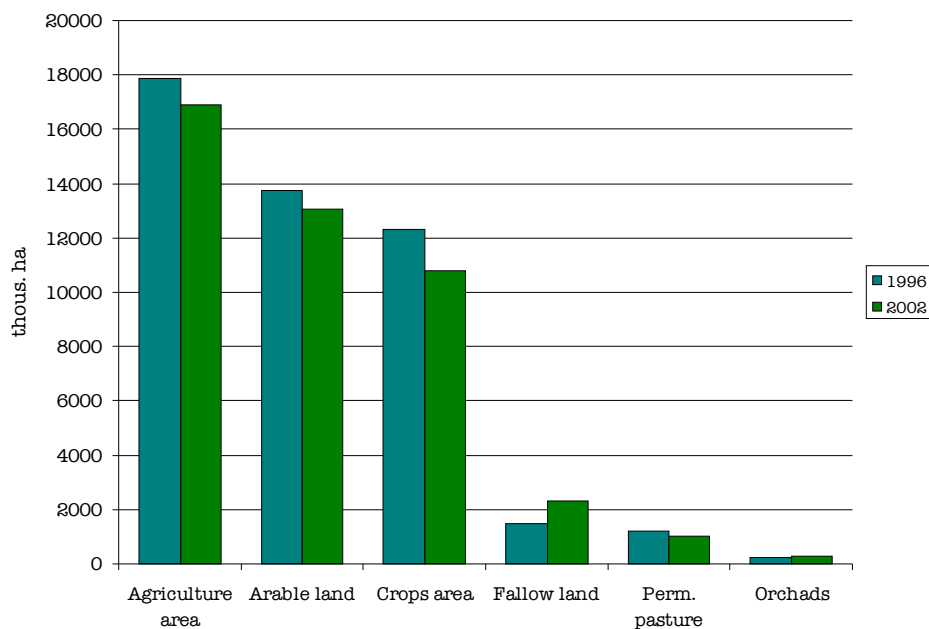


Fig. 1. Land use in Poland 1996 and 2002

- There has been a polarization of the farm size, creating new and enlarging existing large farms, but also increasing the number of the smallest farms. The total number of farms decreased from 3.1 to 2.9 million, but the largest increase was in the class of 30-50 ha in area (see Fig. 2);
- There has been a deintensification of agriculture production, with a reduction in labour consuming cultivation in commercial farms and an increase in fallowing on semi-subsistence units. At present 1.9 million ha of land lies fallow on private farms.
- There has been an overall increase in the share of cereals and a decrease in the area down to potatoes.
- Cattle breeding has begun to be subjected to changes similar to those experiences previously in existing EU countries. A concentration of breeding and an increase in productivity is taking place. Now only 42% of farms over 1 ha in area own cows and produce milk - down from 62% in 1996 (see Fig. 3).

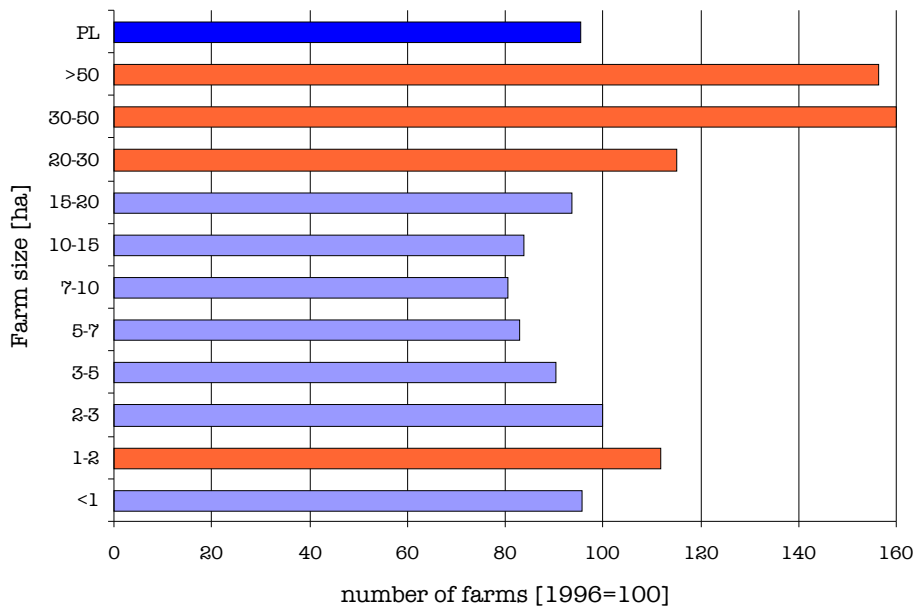


Fig. 2. Farm size structure in Poland 1996-2002 (1996=100)

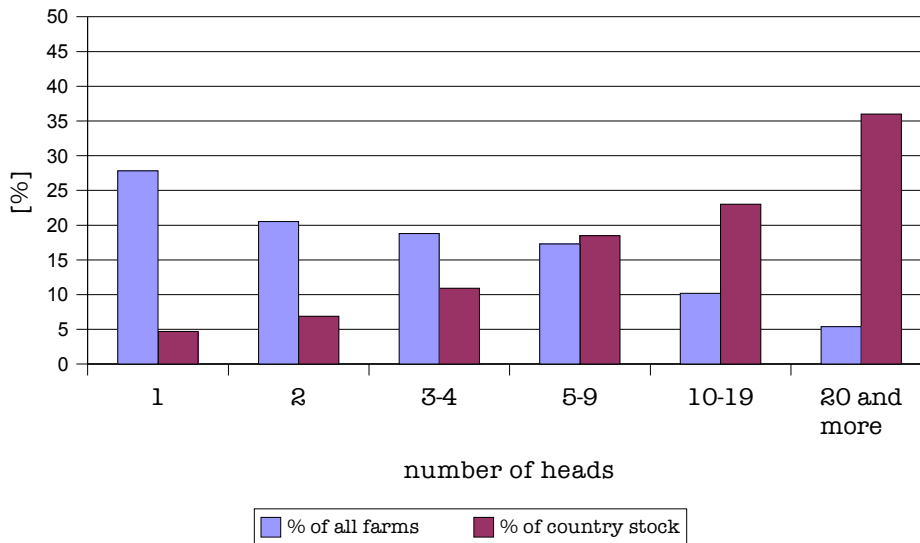


Fig. 3 Cattle stock structure in Poland in 2002

- The number of cattle in Poland is now half that at the beginning of the transition period. However, studies by Gorzelak show that thanks to the increase in productivity milk production is down by only 30% (Gorzelak, 2003).

As a result of these changes three groups of farms evolved:

- large, often specialised farms, producing for the market;
- farms with 2-7 ha that, with the help of the state, will be able to adjust to market rules;
- small farms producing only for their own needs, will gradually disappear.

The Carpathians and their foothills in southern Poland play an important role in the country's ecological infrastructure. This area holds six out of Poland's 23 national parks and a dozen or so landscape parks. Most of the Wisła's headwaters rise here and it is one of the most attractive tourist regions of Poland.

Traditionally, livestock densities in the Carpathians were some of the highest in the country. Part of the reason was the support they got under the Mountain Act, which was repealed in 1990. Now, as in the rest of the country, the reduction in the number of herds continues. Many farms have given up on commercial milk and beef production.

The decline in both cultivation and animal breeding has led to rapid withdrawal of farmers from Less Favoured Areas (LFAs). Few farmers sell their products now, including milk (see Fig. 4).

The number of cattle, sheep and horses has reduced significantly in the communes of southern Poland. In 2002, in one third of communes in this area the number of cattle was less than 30% of that in 1986, and in over 60% of communes the number is less than half (see Fig. 5).

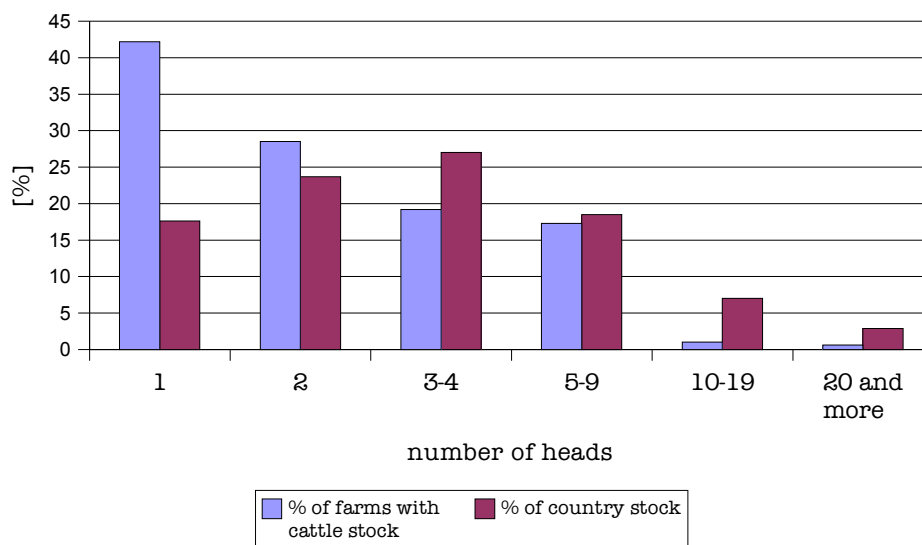


Fig. 4 Cattle stock structure in Malopolska in 2002

The largest changes occurred in suburban areas, where breeding was always on a small scale (the farms owned 1-2 cows each). Now many farmers do not breed cattle at all (in the suburbs of Kraków, 70% of farmers now have no cattle).

Even greater changes took place in sheep breeding. Up to the mid-1980s it was the traditional region of breeding, with sheep playing an important part in the Carpathian highlanders' culture. Sheep have more or less disappeared from this area – in most communes the number of sheep is less than 10% of what it was 20 years ago (see Fig. 6).

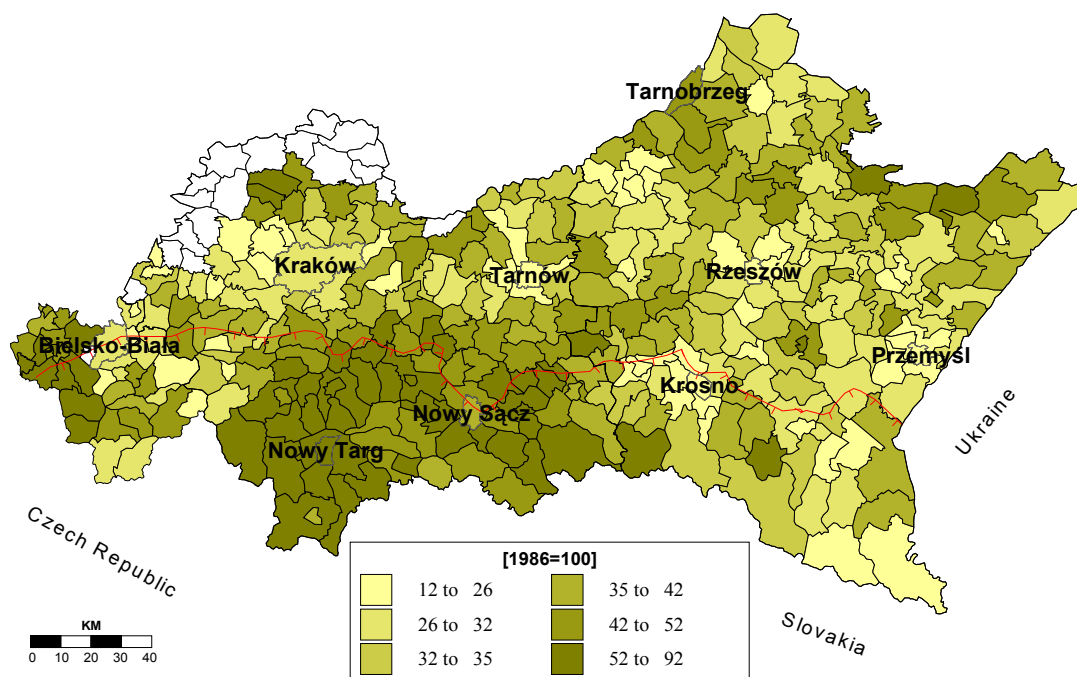


Fig. 5. Changes of cattle stock in southern Poland 1986-2002 (1986=100)

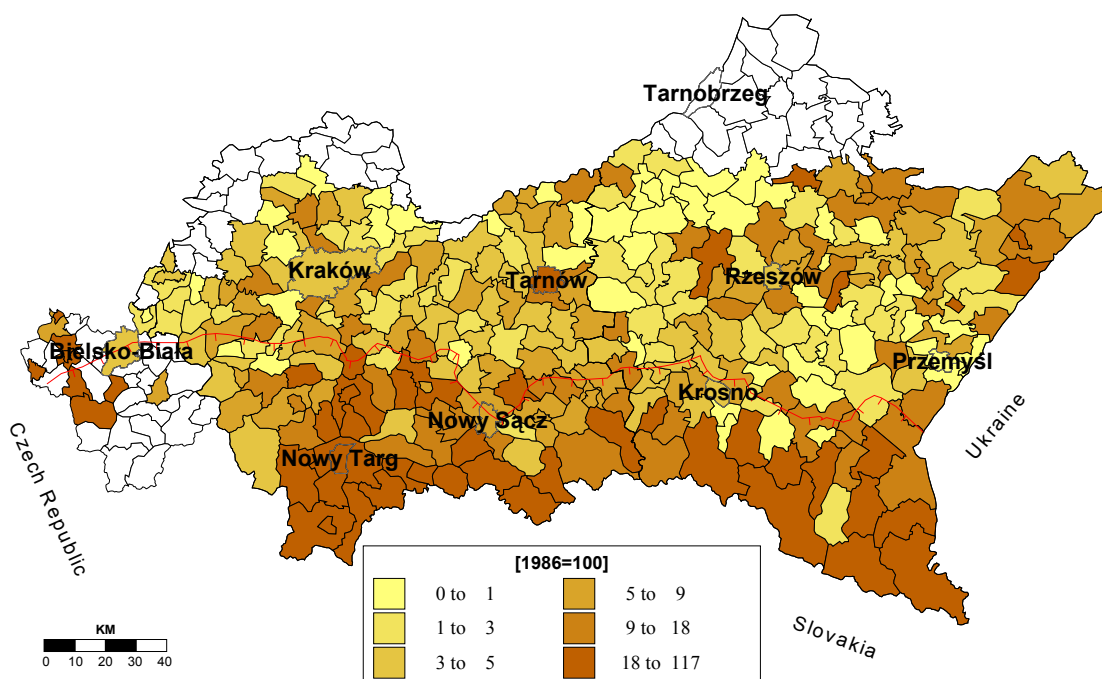


Fig. 6 Changes of sheep stock in southern Poland 1986-2002 (1986=100)

Shift to native breeds

Ironically, these trends, when put together with subsidies from agri-environment programmes, may result in a shift in the overall herd breakdown towards Polish red cattle. Polish red cattle are an

indigenous hardy race suited for the difficult living conditions of the mountain area, and are more immune to a disease than the usual commercial breeds. They are relatively low milk productivity (about 3,000 kg milk per annum), which does not put them in a favourable light amongst commercial milk producers.

In the 1960s, 27% of the cattle population were made up of Polish red cattle. By 1995, in the south of the country, only about 50,000 cows remained. Until quite recently this breed was in serious danger of extinction as the number of pure-bred cows decreased rapidly. Now farmers can expect up to €200 a head per year for maintaining a heard of no fewer than four cows of red race.

Conclusion

Livestock production will no doubt be subject to further declines, not least as subsidies shift towards area payments. The farmers have no choice but to look forward CAP support in the hope that it will be target in such a way that it supports traditional agriculture. In many ways the signs are no good, but there seems a chance the environmental programmes can at least go some way towards promoting the maintenance of traditional farming, especially in the Carpathians.

Bibliography:

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