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With Cows in Mind, Swiss Farmers Wage Litter Battle

By **JOHN TAGLIABUE** NOV. 4, 2013

SOLOTHURN, Switzerland — Before he mows the hay he feeds his dairy cows, Hansueli Wyss performs a new ritual: He scours the fields of his 65-acre farm amid the rolling hills of this farming region, dotted with steep-roofed homes like his 150-year-old farmhouse, for junk — empty bottles and soda or beer cans, hamburger cartons, and much else.

“It’s plastic bags, aluminum cans,” said Mr. Wyss, 50, who reared three children on the farm. “I make an effort to keep an eye on the cows, on the fields, but my machines shred this stuff in with the hay and the silage. That’s where the problem begins.”

Hard as it might be to believe, the orderly Swiss have a litter problem. Oddly, though, it is not in their towns and cities, where you might sooner stumble over a meteorite than a flattened Coke can or empty cigarette pack.

Out in the countryside here southwest of Basel, it is another story. So much litter is tossed out of cars that Swiss farmers have begun a campaign to fight it. They complain not just about the mess but about the danger the refuse poses to livestock.

Litter can be fatal to ruminants. Four years ago, when one of Mr. Wyss’s cows died, he was convinced the cause was litter it ingested by accident. “The problem is, a cow’s stomach cannot always handle metal or glass,” he said. Farmers or their veterinarians sometimes use magnets to draw out metal objects like screws or nails before they damage a cow’s stomach, but magnets are useless with shredded aluminum, he said.

The problem persists, he said, and the litter basket overflowed in July of last year when six cows of a neighboring farmer had to be slaughtered after ingesting something that caused fever and a sharp drop in their milk output.

“It was never proven scientifically, but the assumption was that it was the result of an aluminum can, or something similar,” said Urs Schneider, deputy director of the Swiss Farmers Union, in the capital, Bern, a half-hour’s drive south of here. “There was enormous national attention, even lacking hard proof.”

Farmers hereabout are convinced that aluminum cans, or even glass bottles, tossed onto a field are picked up by harvesting machines, shredded and mixed

in with hay or silage. Once swallowed by the unsuspecting cows, the shreds can prove fatal.

“We get an awful lot of reports,” Mr. Schneider went on. “In the last four to five years, particularly along heavily trafficked roads, the problem has gotten continuously worse.”

After the slaughter of their neighbor’s six cows, farmers like Mr. Wyss, who keeps about 40 cows, a mixed breed of Simmental and Red Holstein, demanded action. A local farmers union, a branch of Mr. Schneider’s national association, came up with the idea for a campaign against litter in the countryside, and the plan attracted followers everywhere.

“What was essential for me,” said Peter Brügger, the local branch secretary, “was the way the public reacted to the news of the cows’ slaughter, and now in all of Switzerland.” He contacted two neighboring cantons, whose farmers immediately supported the idea for a campaign, which soon spread nationwide.

The idea of cows dying of litter hit a nerve. Certainly, the Swiss cow does not enjoy the aura of sanctity of its Indian counterpart. Yet cows produce the cheeses, like Emmentaler and Gruyère, that are central to the Swiss way of life; cows dot the Swiss countryside as assuredly as do charming chalets and pointed church steeples.

Most alarming to many Swiss was the idea that they might be a nation of litterers. And there is no mistaking that the culprits are Swiss, not tourists or immigrant workers, farmers say. “For once it’s not the foreigners,” Daniel Marti, who works for the local farmers association, said with a laugh.

So last spring the national farmers’ association, together with antilitter groups, started a drive to alert the average Swiss to the dangers caused when bottles, cans, plastic bags or packaging is tossed thoughtlessly out car windows. Posters were distributed, like one featuring an orphaned calf bemoaning the death of a mother cow, over the words, “Litter Kills Animals.” Another, lighter in tone, shows a bottle tossed from a car window hitting a cow on the rump, with the text, “Litter Makes Me Sick.”

Some companies that are the source of considerable litter, like McDonald’s and TetraPak, actively support antilitter groups. While the posters went up along roads throughout Switzerland, volunteers visited schools to alert children to just how dangerous a bottle or a can may be for a cow. The farmers are also seeking tougher antilitter laws and deposits on cans, a measure that retailers generally oppose.

The farmers say it is not just about dead animals. Though no studies exist, the estimated cost to them in time and money to rid their fields of litter before seeding or harvesting “goes into the millions,” Mr. Schneider said.

Not everyone is convinced the campaign is working. “I think the results are about equal to zero,” said Erich Walker, 58, who reared six children on his 205-acre farm, where he raises cows, pigs and chickens and grows corn, sugar beets and wheat. Yet he conceded the efforts might “sensitize people a bit.”

Others are more optimistic. “One shouldn’t dramatize,” Mr. Schneider said. “The Swiss sense of order remains strong.”