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Cuban Livestock Sector Impoverished from Drought and Lack of Investment

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The image of starving cows and the confirmation of the deaths of thousands of cattle from lack of water and food have become common in Cuba's livestock sector, which, authorities say, needs urgent investment after more than two decades of deterioration accompanied by the high annual expenditure of millions of dollars to import powdered milk (NotiCen, April 25, 2013).

Milk production in Cuba reached 503.6 million liters in 2013, although the country actually consumed about 1.8 billion liters. Production was 1.1 billion liters annually in the 1980s, the time of beneficial subsidies from the Eastern European communist bloc. When the generous Soviet aid ended, the availability of food for the cattle dropped on the island.

In three decades, meat production also decreased from 300,000 tons to 100,000 tons, while the number of cattle decreased from 7 million to less than 4 million, according to the official newspaper Juventud Rebelde. Economic analyses of this sector often refer nostalgically to the indicators of the late 1950s, when Cuba boasted of having a head of beef per inhabitant, exportation of animals to other Latin American countries, and premium saddlery produced on the island.

In 2013, the island paid US$180 million for imported milk, a large portion of the more than US$2 billion a year intended for food purchases abroad. When Barbara Acosta, the deputy minister of foreign trade, spoke to the national parliament in December she said that the country has an "overconsumption of imported milk."

The state subsidizes milk quotas for children through seven years of age as well as for older people who require it for medical reasons, such as pregnant women and diabetics. However, low milk production has led the government to replace this year's milk quota for the sick and for pregnant women with a "milk substitute" that authorities say has the same nutritional properties.

Drought and crimes

President Raúl Castro, who took over the reins of government when his brother suffered a health crisis in 2006 (NotiCen, Feb. 21, 2008), has tried to steer a more resolute policy for food production and give more encouragement to farmers. "We have to produce milk so that anyone who wants to have a glass of milk can drink it. And there is land to produce it," said Castro in July 2007. Yet his promise has gone unfulfilled because of an economic, bureaucratic, and changing climate scenario that exceeds management capacity.

Rising food prices in the international market led to a 15% increase in the price of powdered milk on the shelves of state-run stores that do business using Cuban convertible currency. In April, state media announced the increase, which sparked bitter public criticism that the meager government salary is not enough to ensure a glass of milk a day for each family member.

In the first quarter of 2014, after seven months without rain in Holguin province, 800 km from Havana, grazing areas are scorched by the sun and 3,300 cattle have died. In addition, 69,000 head of
undernourished livestock have been evacuated and caretakers are trying to save them, feeding them the supply of ground sugar cane. State media laments that there are not enough reserves of hay and water for the livestock.

In other provinces that traditionally raise livestock such as Villa Clara in the center of the country, about 500 km from Havana, state media reported that 18,400 cattle died in 2013 from a lack of food and care. Local people emphasized that the losses occurred in state-run farms where responsibility has been diluted by the administrative structure, meetings, and optimistic speeches.

Private farmers complain that the state pays miserably for their cattle and other products, and only the state can legally market beef. The price paid by the state to a private farmer for a calf can be equivalent to the price of just 1 or 2 kg of meat at the state store network where 1 kg of meat costs the equivalent of US$13 in convertible currency.

Theft and the illegal slaughter of cattle is still one of the common crimes in the Caribbean country. Cattle are allowed to be killed only in state slaughterhouses. Penalties range from four to ten years in prison for those caught slaughtering cattle illegally and up to eight years for those who transport and trade beef, one of the most valuable products on the black market.

Between mid-2011 and 2012, 12,000 crimes of theft and illegal slaughter of cattle were recorded. The government began a national operation in 2011 against illegal activities in the livestock sector with the participation of the Ministerio de Interior and the attorney general. The illegal marketing of lobster, coffee, and some edible endangered species is also monitored by the authorities.

Buses, cars, and trains that travel the island's roads from west to east are inspected for shipments that may be intended for illegal sale in Havana, where small private restaurants and accommodations for foreign visitors proliferate. Beef has become an obsession on all Cuban tables and is sold in few stores, mainly in neighborhoods with better purchasing power where diplomats or tourists reside.

**Investments needed**

The plan to have an efficient dairy industry, one capable of producing cheeses that can compete on the world market, dates back to the 1970s. Under the supervision of then President Fidel Castro, experiments in genetic crossbreeding were carried out. The most memorable success from that time was an exceptional specimen named Ubre Blanca, a Holstein-Zebu cross, that produced 109.5 liters of milk in one day. Her performance placed her in the Guinness Book of World Records.

Nevertheless, what remains of the project are the numerous press photos in which Castro led delegations of foreign visitors through the new dairies. Some of the cattle obtained by crossbreeding were too sickly and dark skinned to withstand the tropical heat. On her death, Ubre Blanca was dissected, stuffed, and displayed in scientific facilities. Her name has become a symbol of mirages and official government determination in the livestock sector.

Currently the Cuban government seeks foreign collaboration and investment to develop its livestock industry. Last April, Cuba's Ministerio de la Agricultura and the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul signed several agreements on the exchange of technology, training, and technical assistance, including for rice and milk production and other aspects of agroindustrial development.

Similarly, the island contemplated the 2.6% decrease in non-sugar agricultural production in 2013. Banana crops, potatoes, and beans were well below expectations with a decline of 33%, 16%, and 6%,

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respectively. The production of tubers decreased by 158 million tons. Citrus and fruit also showed negative figures, a decrease of 27% and 7%, respectively.

Food has been one of the most pressing issues facing the Cuban government since the shortages that started during the "special period" in the 1990s. Since 2008 food has become key in evaluating Castro's management. The shortages have driven him to implement huge measures, such as granting land in usufruct to farmers to try to reverse the deficiencies. The results are far from those expected by the government and state media, which have decreased the laudatory tones used in earlier times.

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