

Mexican farmers take to the streets: They want government aid for countryside

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MEXICO CITY — Claiming their livelihood verges on collapse, tens of thousands of protesting farmers marched through the Mexican capital Thursday to demand help from the government.

"The Mexican countryside is in intensive care," said Jose Andrade, 47, one of the demonstrators who farms about 90 acres of alfalfa and corn in central Guanajuato state, near the ranch of former President Vicente Fox.

Leaders of the march, which was organized by a handful of farm groups from around the country, called for a renegotiation of the 14-year-old North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA, which eliminated the final barriers to imports of agricultural products on New Year's Day.

The protesters want the government to reinstate restrictions on imports of white corn and beans from the U.S. and Canada. They say the imported grain and legumes, staples of the Mexican diet, are driving down the price for their own crops, making it impossible to turn a profit.

"*Sin maiz, no hay pais*," is the farmers' chant. "Without corn, there is no country."

Many of the marchers also demanded government funds to pay for electricity, diesel fuel and fertilizers, which they said they could no longer afford.

"The treaty is already signed. There's nothing to do about that," said Leonardo Patiño, 26, a doctoral student in agriculture from a farm village in central Mexico. He said they want help so that they can compete with other countries.

The protest's organizers put the number of those attending the march at 130,000, including unionized workers who were marching in sympathy with the farmers. Police put the number at about 40,000. Farmers also seized the offices of the federal agriculture ministry in more than a dozen states for the day.

Mexico City's chaotic traffic became more so when police closed off several main avenues to allow the protesters to march to the city's central plaza, the Zocalo, for their rally.

Although march organizers insisted that their movement was not linked to party politics, most of the marchers seemed affiliated with organizations linked to opposition parties.

Tariffs, quotas and other barriers to trade between the Mexico and the U.S. and Canada have been gradually diminished under NAFTA, which kicked off on New Year's Day 1994. Trade between Mexico and the U.S. has dramatically increased under the pact, totaling about \$320 billion last year.

"NAFTA is the best example of the positive effects of free trade," Tony Garza, the U.S. ambassador to Mexico, said Thursday in a Mexico City newspaper essay. "Prosperity has increased, and families have unprecedented access to previously unavailable or unaffordable goods and services."

But many poor Mexican farmers have not realized the benefits of the treaty.

Exports to the north of Mexican fruits and vegetables — produced by large farms on high-quality, irrigated land — have grown by 500 percent since NAFTA was implemented. But at the same time as

many as 2 million Mexicans have abandoned the land, moving into cities here or heading north of the border in search of work.

As many as 3 million Mexican families — or perhaps 15 percent of Mexico's 105 million people — still farm corn, most on small plots of land. Squeezed between high production costs and low crop prices, many poor families supplement their income with money sent home by relatives in the U.S.

"Why do you think there are so many people from our towns living in your country?" said Angel Patiño, 59, who farms about 50 acres in Guanajuato.

Corn imported from the U.S., more than 8 million metric tons last year, now comprises more than a third of that grain consumed in Mexico.

"That has had a devastating impact" on the Mexican countryside, said Tim Wise, a economic development specialist at Tufts University in Massachusetts who has studied this country's farm economy for 15 years. "Mexico still needs a transition period."

Most of the imported corn is of the yellow variety, used for livestock feed and industrial purposes. The tortillas and other food Mexicans eat is made from white corn.

Mexico's agriculture minister, Alberto Cardenas, said Thursday that he and other senior officials would meet with protest leaders next week to discuss their demands. Similar protests in January 2003 achieved limited and temporary gains for the farmers.

Wise argued that the Mexican and U.S. governments could easily satisfy the farmers' demands by agreeing to temporarily restrict the importation of white corn and beans, which make up a small fraction of total agricultural imports here.

"It's striking that the Mexican government hasn't even asked for that concession," Wise said.

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