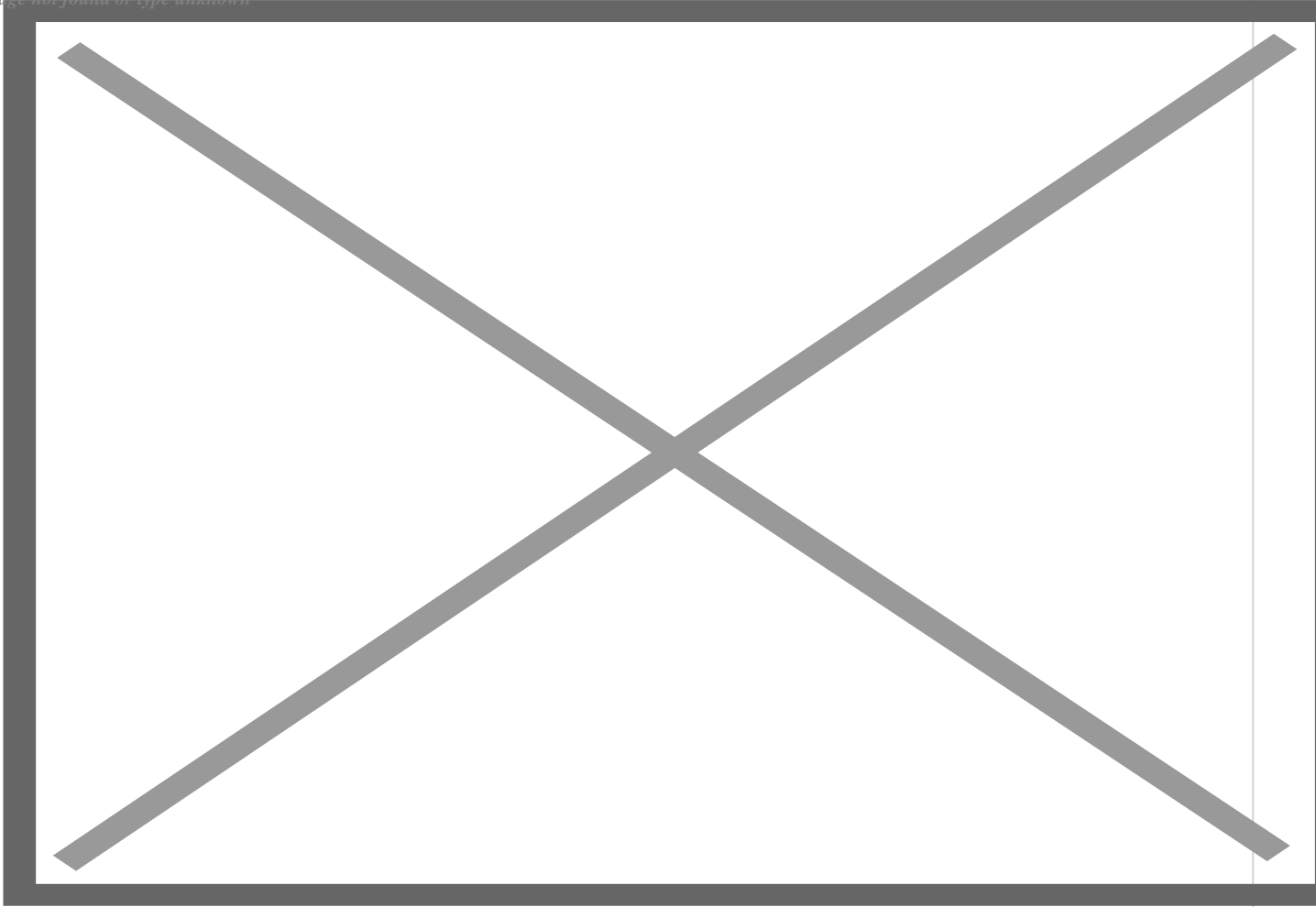


Thousands of Dutch farmers protest against emissions targets

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Tractors on the A1 highway between Apeldoorn and Stroe, the Netherlands [Vincent Jannink/EPA]

Amsterdam, June 23 (RHC)-- Thousands of farmers have gathered in the central Netherlands to protest against the Dutch government's plans to rein in emissions of nitrogen oxide and ammonia, driving their tractors across the Netherlands and snarling traffic on major highways.

Wednesday's protest was organized earlier this month after the government published nationwide targets for reducing emissions, sparking anger from farmers who claim their livelihoods – and those of thousands

of people who work in the agricultural service industry – are on the line.

Calling it an “unavoidable transition,” the government mandated reductions in emissions of up to 70 percent in many places close to protected nature areas and as high as 95 percent in other places.

The government has been forced to act after courts in recent years began blocking permits for infrastructure and housing projects because the country was missing its emissions targets.

By early afternoon, many protesting farmers had arrived at a green field in the small agricultural village of Stroe, about 70 km (45 miles) east of the capital, Amsterdam, where a stage was set up for speakers to address the crowd and music blared out of speakers while children bounced in a giant inflatable pig.

Farmers hooted their tractors’ horns as they drove onto the field, where a banner on a truck read, in Dutch: “What The Hague chooses is deeply sad for the farmer”, a reference to lawmakers in the city that houses the Netherlands’ parliament. Another banner on a tractor said: “We can no longer be stopped.”

The national infrastructure authority urged motorists to delay travel as slow-moving convoys of tractors defied appeals not to use highways as they drove towards the demonstration.

In The Hague, a few dozen farmers and their supporters, some wearing T-shirts with the text “No farmers, no food,” gathered for a breakfast on Wednesday morning before heading to the protest.

“This is where the rules are made,” said dairy farmer Jaap Zegwaard, who parked his tractor on the edge of a park in the city. “I was asked to come here and provide breakfast so we can show we are food producers, not pollution producers.”

The ruling coalition has earmarked an extra 24.3 billion euros (\$25.6bn) to finance changes that will likely make many farmers drastically reduce their number of livestock or get rid of them altogether.

The plans, which have to be carried out by provincial governments, have been opposed even by members of Prime Minister Mark Rutte’s own party and other members of his coalition.

One government lawmaker, Tjeerd de Groot, tweeted that he had planned to go discuss the plan with farmers but called off his trip on the advice of a government security agency. “Does the law of the tractor apply in our country?” he tweeted.

Farming is a key sector in the Dutch economy, with exports worth nearly 105 billion euros (\$110 billion) last year. But it comes at a cost of producing polluting gases, despite farmers taking steps to reduce emissions.

Zegwaard said farmers were prepared to talk about how to reduce emissions but objected to the industry shouldering most of the blame. “Now the agricultural sector is dismissed as a major polluter and that is not right,” he said.

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