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A Harvest of Bounty and Woe

By **Otto Pohl** | Special to The Christian Science Monitor

UBEDA, SPAIN - Gregorio Lopez is not about to let falling wholesale olive oil prices drive him out of business. He has whipped his olive groves in southern Spain into high-production mode: replanting trees closer together, removing extraneous vegetation, adding irrigation systems, and trying to perfect his pesticide regime.

"There's a commercial war in the olive business," he says, inspecting the trees that have been in his family for generations here in the rolling Andalusian hills. "And the only way to compete is to raise production."

Driving the competition is a European Union policy that provides a subsidy based on volume - the more you produce, the more subsidy you get. The resulting production boom has driven down prices, encouraging even more-intensive farming to maintain profits.

It has also increased soil erosion, water usage, and pesticide contamination in an area so environmentally sensitive that experts estimate that 20 percent of Spain is turning into a desert.

With similar problems across many European countries, the EU olive-oil subsidy has become a focal point for those hoping to bring Europe's agricultural policies in line with its stated goals of environmental preservation.

Pressure at the November WTO meeting to decouple agriculture subsidies from production volume may eventually increase the political will for change. The European Union has already disconnected beef supports from production output and made other changes in the Common Agricultural Policy, which also governs the olive-oil subsidy. But under agriculture industry pressure, the EU recently voted to postpone further discussion of the olive-oil subsidy until 2003.

The issue of soil degradation has gained additional visibility with a recent UN-European Union report describing it as the continent's "silent disaster." "The sustainable use of soils is one of Europe's greatest environmental, social, and economic challenges," says United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) executive director Klaus Töpfer.

As Europe's forests were cut down over the centuries for fuel, housing, and crop-growing, erosion was kept at bay through traditional farming techniques, maintenance of sufficient ground cover, and labor-intensive practices such as terraced fields.

But following World War II, as Europe lifted itself from post-war basket case to economic powerhouse, an agricultural policy focused single-mindedly on increasing food production has encouraged the growth of high-intensity monoculture and seriously threatened the continued fertility of the continent's soil.

One of the most dramatic consequences of poor soil maintenance is desertification, a problem that afflicts, within Europe, the Mediterranean countries of Spain, Portugal, Italy, and Greece.

The four nations recently joined the UN Convention to Combat Desertification, an organization originally intended to help countries like those in Saharan Africa.

When rains do come, soil with poor ground cover is often unable to absorb it, and instead is often washed away. Last year, soil erosion caused the worst floods in centuries in Britain. In 1999, the Italian Ministry for the Environment reported that it had classified more than half of Italy as in danger of erosion, after a decade with almost 3,000 landslides. Nearly 80 percent of European farmland will be at risk of soil erosion by 2050, according to UNEP, and within 20 years, another 3.8 million households are expected to be built within flood-prone areas.

Wildlife is endangered as well. With only 2 percent of Europe's wild forests remaining, farmland has become the primary habitat for animal life. Only rarely the direct target of farmers looking to protect their crops, animals such as the Iberian lynx are dying out as modern farming techniques jeopardize their habitats.

"Soil degradation is part of the systematic abuse of the European space, its territory, and the natural resources involved," says Domingo Jiménez Beltrán, executive director of the European Environment Agency. But for now, there is no action taken at the European Community level to combat soil degradation, as there is for air and water contamination.

In the Andalusian region of Jaen, where Ubeda is located, the olive tree has taken over virtually all available land. With the neighboring Córdoba region, the area produces 40 percent of the world's olive oil. From the air, the land looks like a big corduroy quilt, with the green rows of olive trees standing out against the bare brown soil.

On modern olive plantations, heavy use of pesticides kills off insects, which keeps away birds. Groundcover and hedges, which offer a habitat for ground-dwelling animals, are removed to make tractor harvesting easier. The imprint of the mechanized plantations is clear in soil degradation, as well. The Spanish Ministry of Agriculture estimates that 80 million metric tons of soil are lost yearly off the 1 million hectares of olive plantations in Andalusia alone.

Farmland must play a more complex role than just plots that produce food, says Giovanna Pisano, agriculture policy officer for Birdlife International, a non-profit studying the impact of European agricultural policy on bird populations. "The CAP has pushed intensification and monoculture on farmland for the last 30 years," she says, "but traditional agriculture and mixed farming is absolutely fundamental to preserving the majority of wildlife in Europe."

Many experts say what will most likely spur the EU into action on subsidies is its planned expansion in East Europe. "You start handing out cash to Polish and Hungarian farmers," says Pisano, "and the EU budget will go totally out of control."