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Announcement from the Farmers Association of Iceland to its affiliated associations, partners and friends

The volcanic eruption in Iceland and its effects on Icelandic agriculture

In the past few days the Farmers Association of Iceland has received greetings and inquiries from its affiliates, partners and friends around the world in relation to the eruption of Eyjafjallajökull glacier. The Association wishes to convey its gratitude for the sympathy expressed towards Icelandic farmers and share some information on recent events and their effect on Icelandic agriculture.

Farmers in South Iceland are experiencing significant difficulties as a result of the Eyjafjallajökull eruption. There are great quantities of volcanic material in the atmosphere and ash deposits on the ground. There is also a risk of lowland flooding due the volcanic activity being under the glacier.

Volcanic activity around Eyjafjallajökull originally started on 20 March with an eruption at Fimmvörðuháls. This eruption lasted for approximately 3 weeks and did not result in major disruptions for people or livestock. Nevertheless over six hundred people needed to evacuate their homes on the first night, mostly residents in urban areas in the South. The people were then allowed back home in stages during the next few days. On Wednesday, April 14, a new and larger eruption occurred in a new location underneath the glacier itself. Its behaviour and effects are different from the first eruption and have proven more severe.

Agriculture in affected areas

The area affected by the eruption is an important agricultural area, containing 15% of all cattle, 6% of all sheep and 17% of all horses in Iceland. 12% of all dairy production in Iceland also comes from the close vicinity of the eruption. Fortunately, the eruption has occurred during a time in which most livestock are still kept indoors.

One of the major dangers caused by the eruption is the floods, which began with the second eruption. The worst seems to have passed, although there is still a risk of further flooding. Croplands have seen some damage but nothing catastrophic. The lambing season has begun in some farms but sheep cannot be let out due to volcanic ash in the atmosphere and on the ground.

The inhabitants of around 20 farms closest to the volcano itself have been relocated. However, farmers are allowed to re-enter areas defined as danger zones to perform essential farm work. All other traffic has been forbidden in the area closest to Eyjafjallajökull. Several roads have had to be breached to channel floodwater. Driving is difficult in some places due to low visibility, caused by ash in the air. However, problems with milk transportation have been solved.

Ash can be harmful

Ash has fallen in many areas in Iceland and farmers have been urged to be aware of the danger and monitor their livestock actively. The volcanic ash brings toxins which can be harmful to both animals and humans. Most farmers in the affected areas have rounded up their horses and sheep and placed them indoors. In some places it is almost impossible to stay outdoors due to clouds of

fine ash particles. There are few poultry and pig farms in the area, but ash fall can create major problems for such farms as they rely on air conditioning. Drinking water has not been spoiled but farmers are keeping a close eye on any such developments.

Response of the government and the Farmers Association of Iceland

The minister of fisheries and agriculture has established a special taskforce to respond to the potential impact of the eruption on agriculture. The Farmers Association has a representative on that taskforce and is working closely with the ministry and other parties involved. The role of the taskforce is to assess a response to the current situation and to organise efforts in case livestock cannot be let out in the coming spring. Naturally, various questions arise following such disasters concerning the effects of ash fall, potential evacuation of livestock, transportation, insurance issues and food supplies. As yet, no decision has been taken regarding the evacuation of livestock to other parts of the country, but this issue is being discussed.

The Chief Veterinary Officer of Iceland along with regional veterinarians are working closely with farmers in relation to the ash fall and all livestock owners in the area have been contacted about taking animals inside and tending to them. Great emphasis is laid on guaranteeing livestock's access to clean water and sufficient food. Farmers across Iceland have been asked to anticipate the possibility of ash fall in their region and to be prepared, as winds can quickly change direction, bringing volcanic ash to different parts of the country.

In general, residents of affected areas have responded promptly to public safety messages and the government's well-rehearsed contingency plans have been successfully implemented.

What lies ahead?

It is hard to forecast the future development of the eruption. Eyjafjallajökull has erupted three times since the 9th century A.D., in all cases preceding or following an eruption of neighbouring volcano, Katla, which is under Mýrdalsjökull glacier. The danger involved in a Katla eruption is mostly due to glacial burst floods. So far there have been no indications of an impending eruption in Katla.

At this point nothing can be said regarding further complications. If widespread ash fall persists over an extended period of time the toxic materials in the ash can have adverse effects on vegetation and the health of livestock. Such developments are not unknown in Iceland in certain areas and last occurred in 1980 following an eruption of another volcano, Hekla.

Iceland is a country of harsh living conditions in close proximity to some of the most extreme forces of nature, as underlined by this eruption. Icelandic agriculture is fragile and not much is needed to seriously upset its balance. Right now vegetation is beginning to re-emerge after the winter. The grazing season lies ahead and lambing starts in earnest in two or three weeks. Should the eruption continue for an extended period, resulting in ash damage to grazing fields and crops, it would constitute a major blow for the region and agriculture in Iceland as a whole.

We sincerely hope that this situation will not last for long as we realise that its impact has already been felt outside Iceland, with widespread air traffic disruptions. Despite the eruption, day-to-day life in the rest of Iceland carries on and for most Icelanders it is business as usual!

Sincerely,

Haraldur Benediktsson, chairman of the Farmers Association of Iceland, hb@bondi.is

If you need further information, please don't hesitate to contact.

Best regards, Tjörvi Bjarnason

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