

Verdammt – only eight tonnes!

By Lloyd O'Connell

As hard as we tried, attempts at a sincere sharing of the disappointment our many German and Scandinavian host-farmers felt at “only getting around eight tonnes this year”, were pretty feeble. To put you in the picture here – I’m not talking about the eight tonnes of wild boar, cabbages or even salmon, our farm study tour group managed to consume in three weeks – it was the eight tonnes per dryland hectare of winter wheat our hosts were lamenting.

Apparently there was a ‘drought’ in northern Europe for a week or two causing this dip in average yields. A nine or ten tonne result is more the norm for the better farmers, not to mention a very good profit at current grain prices. Anyway, our hosts from Berlin through to Oslo put on a brave face and extended wonderful warmth and hospitality as they introduced us to their various farms and technologies.

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A Swedish farm straight out of the picture books. Christoffer Anderson (white shirt kneeling) from the Vaderstad company, welcomed our group to the family farm not far from Stockholm. Earlier in the day we had inspected the state-of-the-art manufacturing facility operated by this world-leading farm equipment manufacturer.



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How to grow, and keep healthy and weed-free, high-yielding cereal crops was a talking point at the Bayer trial sites in southern Sweden, just across the bridge from Copenhagen. We were shown a weed trial where apparently the wheat “would not be worth harvesting”. Our growers still reckoned it was a bumper crop.



Berlin's Checkpoint Charlie is now a tourist attraction. The dismantling of the wall separating East and West Germany in 1989, ushered in a modern era of agriculture in the vast and fertile farmlands of eastern Germany.



Chemical engineer Sonny Jorgensen won a few hearts and hard hats after our tour of Cheminova's glyphosate plant in north-west Denmark. Cheminova is represented in Australia by its subsidiary, Ospray.

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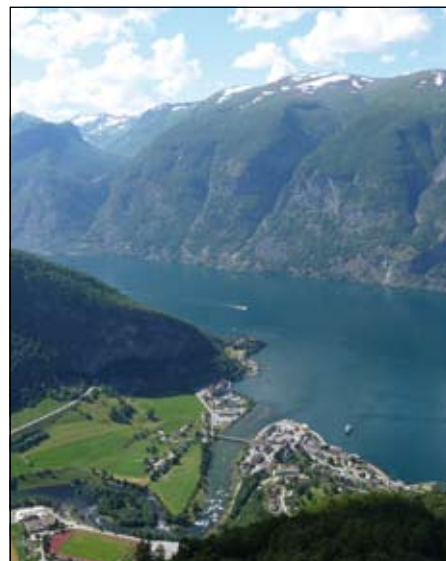
Farm sizes are not large in the Australian context, but they are productive. With cropping land ranging anywhere from A\$10,000 to \$60,000 per hectare – prices fuelled ironically by farm subsidies – and variable costs to grow cereal crops of around \$1500 per hectare, German and Scandinavian farmers can't afford to miss very often.

Having doubled in price over the past two years to around \$330 per tonne, winter wheat is generally the most profitable broadacre grain crop. Their systems are nitrogen driven and cereal crops are carefully nurtured with applied nitrogen rates of 150 to 200 kg N per hectare (each year) not uncommon. There is much less emphasis on phosphate.

Two or three fungicides are applied and weed control is intense throughout the growing season.

Now here's the rub – winter wheat crops can have a birthday. A 'normal' growing season is around 11 months (September–October sowing through to July–August harvest) but occasionally the birthday is clocked up. And this goes a long way to explaining the huge yields. The very reliable annual rainfall of around 600 mm does help, as does pretty good soil, but it's the amount of sunlight these crops are happily photosynthesising which makes all the difference.

Speaking of the climate. After three weeks of perfect sunny days, which showed



The majestic Norwegian fiords are home to salmon farms and gob-smacked tourists. The locals see them as 'roads' and an excuse not to build another tunnel. In one day, our skillfully driven bus passed through no less than 52 tunnels ranging in length from 50 metres to 14 km.

off the magnificent scenery, villages and cities of Scandinavia to perfection, group members began to wonder if they were experiencing global warming first-hand.

But for most, it turned out to be just an extended hot flush brought on by chatting with the impossibly beautiful, friendly and svelte Scandinavians.

Fears of global warming were further dispelled by those intrepid group members who travelled 'way up north' into the Arctic Circle to inspect their taxes and grain

levies at work at the Svalbard Global Seed Vault. Here, millions of crop seeds from around the world are being securely stored deep within a frozen mountain 1000 km north of the Norwegian mainland.

This Global Crop Diversity Trust facility, partly funded by Australian grain growers, ensures that even in the most Doomsday of scenarios, plant breeders across the globe have access to diverse plant varieties and species.

Warm in the knowledge that we are in-

involved in a very worthwhile global project, we welcomed the chill from countless majestic glaciers as our exploratory ship carefully navigated its way around polar bears and the biggest Arctic ice cap for many years.

Touring Scandinavia in summer is an unforgettable insight to a region of magnificent farmlands, intriguing cultures and spectacular scenery. The often 'touring' Vikings obviously didn't appreciate how good they had it. ■



This proud beast, spotted in the foreground of a Svalbard glacier, weighed around 500 kg. Seals and wandering tourists are his preferred foods.



We went a long way to check that your GRDC grain levies are being spent wisely. Even with a total loss of all artificial cooling, the Svalbard Global Seed Vault will keep the seed collection at a sub-zero temperature for decades.

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