

US and World Gripped by Fertilizer Crisis: High Commodity Prices and Food Insecurity

Fertilizer shortages should be used to hasten environmental transitions, official says

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“Fertilizer shortages are real now.”

Uttered by USAID’s [Samantha Power](#) in a May 1 ABC interview with former Democratic advisor George Stephanopoulos, the words briefly drowned out the din of the news cycle.

They were not unexpected to some.

Power, who served as U.N. ambassador under Obama, mentioned [fertilizer](#) shortages after weeks of hints from the Biden administration.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki repeatedly alluded to challenges obtaining fertilizer in recent press briefings. So did President Joe Biden himself in a [joint statement](#) with EU President Ursula von der Leyen.

“We are deeply concerned by how Putin’s war in Ukraine has caused major disruptions to international food and agriculture supply chains, and the threat it poses to global food security. We recognize that many countries around the world have relied on imported food staples and fertilizer inputs from Ukraine and Russia, with Putin’s aggression disrupting that trade,” the leaders stated.

In an [April report](#) titled, “The Ukraine Conflict and Other Factors Contributing to High Commodity Prices and Food Insecurity,” the USDA’s Foreign Agriculture Service acknowledged that “for agricultural producers around the world, high fertilizer and fuel prices are a major concern.”

While political rhetoric has often focused on Russia, the rise in fertilizer prices did not begin with its invasion of Ukraine.

An [analysis](#) from the Peterson Institute of International Economics shows that fertilizer prices have rapidly climbed since mid-2021, spiking first in late 2021 and again around the time of the invasion.

Industry observers have pointed out that commodity prices are not solely affected by Vladimir Putin.

Max Gagliardi, an Oklahoma City oil and gas industry commentator who cofounded the energy marketing firm Ancova Energy, told The Epoch Times that the war and sanctions have helped drive the upward climb of natural gas prices in Europe.

Natural gas is used in the Haber-Bosch process, which generates the ammonia in nitrogen fertilizers. Those fertilizers feed half the planet.

Gagliardi thinks the picture is more complicated at home, where environmental, social, and corporate governance (ESG) has become a controversial tool of stakeholder capitalism, often used to force divestment from fossil fuels or other industries disfavored by the left.

“It’s a combination of record demand domestically and from LNG [liquid natural gas] exports combined with less than expected supply, in part due to the starving of capital for the O&G industry due to the ESG/green movement pressures on capital providers, plus pressure from Wall Street to spend less capital and return value to shareholders,” he said.

Language from Power Echoes Green Activists, EU, WEF

In the case of increasing costs for oil, natural gas, and coal, some politicians and green activists have argued that those fast-rising prices mark an opportunity to accelerate a move from hydrocarbons to wind, solar, and electrification.

“Big Oil is price gouging American drivers. These liars do nothing to make the United States energy independent or stabilize gas prices. It’s time we break up with Big Oil and ignite a clean energy revolution,” Sen. Ed Markey (D-Mass.) [said](#) on Twitter in March.

“I say we take this opportunity to double down on our renewable energy investments and wean ourselves off of planet-destroying fossil fuels[.] Never let a crisis go to waste,” said former Joe Biden delegate and political commentator Lindy Li in a [Twitter post](#) about ExxonMobil’s exit from Russia’s Far East.

In geopolitical parlance, ExxonMobil leaving Russia is known as a BFD

I say we take this opportunity to double down on our renewable energy investments and wean ourselves off of planet-destroying fossil fuels

Never let a crisis go to waste <https://t.co/1ZWs5YtvMB>

— Lindy Li (@lindyli) [March 2, 2022](#)

Meanwhile, Mandy Gunasekara, an environmental lawyer who served as the Environmental Protection Agency’s chief of staff under President Trump, said in an interview with The Epoch Times, “It’s always been part of their plan to make the price of traditional energy

sources go up, so then wind and solar could actually compete with them.”

Describing how fertilizer shortages could actually help advance a particular agenda, Power sounded much like Li.

She even used an identical phrase: “Never let a crisis go to waste.”

Intentionally or not, this echoed a line from another high-profile Obama alum, Rahm Emanuel: “Never let a serious crisis go to waste.” Emanuel was talking about the 2008-2009 financial meltdown.

“Less fertilizer is coming out of Russia. As a result, we’re working with countries to think about natural solutions, like manure and compost. And this may hasten transitions that would have been in the interest of farmers to make anyway. So, never let a crisis go to waste,” Power told Stephanopoulos.

Power’s language of setting crisis as opportunity parallels similar statements from environmental groups.

Writing to EU President von der Leyen and other EU bureaucrats, a group of European and international environmental organizations urged the union to stay the course on environmental policy.

“The crisis in Ukraine is yet another reminder of how essential it is to implement the Green Deal and its Farm to Fork and Biodiversity Strategies,” the [letter](#) states.

The Farm to Fork Strategy confidently asserts that its actions to curb the overuse of chemical fertilizers “will reduce the use of [fertilizers] by at least 20 percent by 2030.”

“Ploughing more farmland, as is currently being put forward, to grow crops for biofuels and intensive animal farming by using even more synthetic pesticides and [fertilizers] would be absurd and dangerously increase ecosystem collapses, the most severe threat to social-ecological stability and food security,” the activists’ letter argues.

“The European Union must tackle the current challenges by accelerating the implementation of its strategies to reduce the use of synthetic pesticides and [fertilizers], to preserve its natural environment and the health of its citizens.”

Numerous publications from the [World Economic Forum](#) (WEF), known for its role in orchestrating the global response to COVID-19, have made similar arguments.

A [2020 white paper](#) from WEF and the consulting firm McKinsey and Company warns of greenhouse gas emissions and potential runoff from fertilizers, advocating for an end to fertilizer subsidies in developing countries and praising [China](#) for its efforts to reduce fertilizer use.

A [2018 WEF white paper](#), co-authored with the consulting firm Accenture, claims that “a 21st century approach to organic farming” should strive to close the gap in yields between organic and conventional farming.

WEF’s vision of 21st century agriculture comes into greater focus in another [2018](#)

[report](#) titled, “Bio-Innovation in the Food System.”

It advocates for the bioengineering of new microbes to fix nitrogen more efficiently in plants.

“This offers the prospect of lowering and more optimally applying nitrogen fertilizer,” WEF’s report states.

WEF has also pushed the use of “biosolids”—in other words sewage sludge—as [fertilizer](#).

Urine, it notes, “makes an excellent agricultural fertilizer.”

Gunasekara, formerly of the EPA, said that fertilizer overuse and runoff presents serious risks, giving rise to toxic algal blooms in the Great Lakes and the Gulf of Mexico.

However, “generally speaking, the farmers are very, very efficient with their fertilizer use. They have a built-in incentive not to waste something that is a high input cost,” she told The Epoch Times, adding that in her experience, industry and communities could work out positive solutions with regulators.

Heavy-handed restrictions, she argued, are not the solution.

The UK Absolute Zero report, produced by academics at top British universities, goes even further than some other reports in its opposition to nitrogen-based fertilizers and conventional agriculture more generally.

It anticipates a phaseout of beef and lamb production, with “fertilizer use greatly reduced,” in order to meet net-zero emissions targets by 2050.

“There are substantial opportunities to reduce energy use by reducing demand for [fertilizers],” the report states.

It also envisions cuts to energy in the food sector of 60 percent before 2050.

That imagined energy austerity, with its many unforeseeable consequences for human life, apparently will not last forever.

The report claims that after 2050, energy for fertilizer and other aspects of food production will “[increase] with zero-emissions electricity.”

“A food crisis/famine advances the long-term goal of more centralized control of energy, food, transportation, etc., as advanced by the Davos crowd of the WEF. Governments must expand their powers to ‘handle’ crises, and that is what progressives love more than anything,” Marc Morano, proprietor of the website Climate Depot, told The Epoch Times.

Sri Lanka’s Organic Experiment a Stark Warning

Though Power’s remarks were consistent with talking points from Democrats, WEF, the EU, and similar factions, they came at a particularly inconvenient moment for advocates of organic fertilizer—Sri Lanka’s recent experiment with abandoning chemical fertilizer has plunged the island nation into chaos that shows no signs of letting up.

According to a 2021 report from the USDA Foreign Agriculture service, Sri Lankan agricultural economists [warned](#) that a rapid shift from chemical to organic fertilizers “will

result in significant drops in crop yields.”

The country has since had to compensate one million of its farmers to the tune of \$200 million, as reported by [Al Jazeera](#).

With food shortages now a reality, anti-government protests prompted Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to declare a state of emergency on May 6—the second in two months.

“[Sri Lanka is] now literally on the verge of famine, because they’ve had massive crop failures,” Gunasekara said.

“This administration wants to use this as an opportunity to push their Green New Deal-style farming tactics, which we’ve seen implemented elsewhere, that cause significant problems beyond what we’re currently facing from our farmers’ perspective and what consumers are going to be facing,” she added.

“Manure cannot compete with modern chemical agriculture for high yield farming that the world depends on,” Morano of Climate Depot said.

Rufus Chaney, a retired USDA scientist known for his research on sewage sludge-based fertilizers, echoed Morano’s skepticism about making up for missing chemical fertilizers with organic alternatives.

“There are not enough useful (and not already being used) organic fertilizers to change the balance of any chemical fertilizer shortages,” Rufus told The Epoch Times via email.

“Nearly all organic fertilizers are built on livestock manure and can only be shipped short distances before it becomes cost-prohibitive,” he added.

These realities underscore another apparent contradiction in green policy—even as climate activists push for cuts to chemical fertilizer use and greater reliance on organic alternatives, they are working assiduously to cull the livestock populations that provide manure for those fertilizers.

In Northern Ireland, for example, a newly passed climate Act will require the region to lose a million sheep and cattle.

The EU’s Farm to Fork Strategy even [states](#) that work on fertilizers will be focused “in hotspot areas of intensive livestock farming and of recycling of organic waste into renewable fertilizers.”

“For years we were warned that ‘climate change’ would cause food shortages, but now it appears that climate policy will be one of the biggest factors in causing food shortages,” Morano told The Epoch Times.

He cited [research](#) suggesting that a move to organic farming in the United Kingdom could actually raise carbon dioxide emissions, as the decrease in domestic yields can be expected to boost carbon-intensive imports.

“What the Biden admin is doing is seizing on ‘crises’ to advance their agenda. Greta [Thunberg] famously said, ‘I want you to panic.’ Because when you panic, you don’t think rationally and calmly, and you make poor choices. The only way they can sell these climate-

inspired utopian energy and food production fantasies is during times of COVID crisis or wartime crisis,” he added.

China’s Role Scrutinized

Still, others see the focus on Russia as a distraction from China’s maneuvering on the world stage.

In 2021, China limited exports of both phosphate and urea fertilizers. The country has also stepped up its fertilizer imports.

China’s export restrictions came after it rapidly emerged as “the most important and most influential country in the fertilizer business,” according to an outlook document from the Gulf Chemicals & Petrochemicals Association.

The Peterson Institute’s [analysis](#) shows that as global fertilizer prices shot upward in 2021 and 2022, China’s fertilizer prices mostly leveled off.

Although the USDA’s April report did note the impact of China’s fertilizer export restrictions and heavy fertilizer imports, its executive summary drew greater attention to the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

That summary did not mention China by name among the “countries imposing export bans and restrictions.”

Stanford University’s Gordon Chang, a China expert, [warned](#) on Twitter on May 6 that China has been “buying chemical companies whose products are needed for fertilizer and, more generally, food production,” citing comments from onshoring advocate Jonathan Bass.

The Epoch Times has reached out to Chang and Bass for additional details.

We must, as a national priority, protect our farmland, ranches, processing facilities, distribution channels, and all the other elements that support agriculture and the food chain. [#China](#)’s regime is seeking control. Its intentions are undoubtedly malign. [#CCP](#)

— Gordon G. Chang (@GordonGChang) [May 7, 2022](#)

China has also been [buying up American farmland](#) as well as ports around the world, including ports in the now-food insecure Sri Lanka.

Physicist Michael Sekora, a former project director in the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), told The Epoch Times that worldwide fertilizer shortages could reflect China’s long-range technology strategy.

A key element of that strategy, he argued, is undercutting the United States whenever and wherever possible.

“Our ability to produce food is very much under attack right now. Some people say, ‘Oh, it’s just a coincidence.’ It’s China,” Sekora said.

“China has been very strategic in making sure they shore up what they have and restricting access throughout the rest of the world,” Gunasekara said.

“When you have people come in that are very anti-development and anti-growth, China can put its finger on the global market, making it that much harder, and then try to use that as an example to exert more authority and have access to greater power.”

Pain Felt Around the World

“It’s been hectic,” said South African tobacco farmer Herman J. Roos.

Roos told The Epoch Times that fertilizer prices near him have jumped since the invasion of Ukraine, on the heels of steep increases over the previous year.

He was able to buy all the fertilizer he needs for this year before the latest price shock. Yet, he expects shortages of urea, monoammonium phosphate (MAP), and other fertilizers to strain a population of farmers already under significant stress.

Copper theft, lack of government support, and the ever-present threat of physical violence are all pushing Roos and producers like him to the brink.

Yet, for all the challenges in South Africa, Roos anticipates the fallout will be worse elsewhere in the continent.

“The economy will be hit harder in countries like Mozambique, Zambia, and Zimbabwe—countries where your agricultural system is more focused on subsistence farming,” Roos added.

They and other sub-Saharan African countries are heavily dependent on South Africa for their food supply.

Roos prays food riots won’t come to South Africa. The country is still recovering from a wave of riots in summer 2021, prompted by the arrest of former South African President Jacob Zuma.

He does predict that some farmers in the country will go bankrupt.

Back in the United States, Connecticut landscaper Adam Geriak does not yet face such stark choices.

He told The Epoch Times that fertilizer prices near him are up, in line with estimates a Connecticut garden store provided to The Epoch Times.

“I do primary garden work and use organic fertilizers, which primarily come from poultry manure,” Geriak said, adding that the price of poultry manure fertilizer may have risen too.

He does not think fertilizer price increases will have much of an effect on him. Yet, other facets of the current economic picture are worrisome to him as he tries to manage his small business most effectively.

“I’m having a hard time planning for the future because of the uncertainty, and I think other owners are feeling this too. In the previous two years, clients seemed to have open coffers. They wanted more projects done and there seemed to be a lot of money going around.

Clients seem to be a bit tighter now, asking how they can save money on certain projects and such,” Geriak said.

“Being on the verge of a recession, and retirement accounts down may be leading to these issues,” he added.

The USDA report on Sri Lanka’s organic experiment states that the country’s government made impossible promises to different parties.

It informed farmers it would handle the cost of moving away from chemical fertilizers while telling consumers that rice on their shelves would not become pricier, all while attempting to realize environmental and public health benefits through a breakneck transition to organic fertilizers.

“If you put too much emphasis on environmental issues, and you ignore the very real impact that can have to people’s daily lives, it can have dire consequences,” Gunasekara told The Epoch Times.

“Unfortunately, we’re seeing it in the most dire of circumstances, which is a suppressed food supply. I think that situation is only going to get worse because of the rise in prices for fertilizers and diesel and everything else that’s going to make it harder for farmers in the U.S. to produce, then also globally.”

Josh, a farmer in Texas who raises small livestock, also believes things will get worse before they get better. He did not want to share his last name.

“I personally think that we haven’t even begun to feel the effects of inflation in our grocery store bills, because last year, the costs to produce were 1/3 to 1/2 the cost farmers and ranchers are having to pay this year. That cost has to be absorbed by the buyer to make it feasible for them to even continue,” he said in a message to The Epoch Times.

“My family is preparing now and stocking up our freezers and pantry because we are really concerned how bad it can get this next year.”

He estimates that fertilizer prices near him have increased 200 or even 300 percent, “dependent on what program you are running.”

The rise in diesel prices has hurt him the most. “Farm equipment runs on diesel,” he pointed out.

According to AAA’s [gas price website](#), diesel in Texas is running at an average of \$5.231, up from \$2.820 a year ago.

“I can’t imagine how anyone would profit or sustain raising crops or cattle with all these price increases that effect your overhead,” Josh said, saying he has heard about other ranchers and farmers culling their herds to avoid losses.

“Food shortages are a great way to collapse the current system and install a [Great Reset](#),” Morano, of Climate Depot, told The Epoch Times.

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