

From Sri Lanka to Salinas

Will California - and the Nation - Learn Anything from Sri Lanka's Green Apocalypse?

By [Thomas Buckley](#)

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Ah, Sri Lanka.

In 2020: a beautiful, agriculturally self-sufficient island nation full of tea and tourists and holder of the highest "Environmental, Social, and Governance" (ESG) investor rating in the world.

And then, as part of the larger "green" effort spurred on by international Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), woke capital, and, seemingly, a desire to sit at the big table at the various and sundry global initiative conferences, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa banned the use of manufactured fertilizer in order to create a more climate-friendly sustainable farming sector. In April, 2021, the country went all-organic overnight.

What could possibly go wrong?

prices for food (especially rice) and fuel and other daily basics skyrocketed, the tea crop - and the hundreds of millions it earns in international trade - was decimated. The nation defaulted on its foreign debt, had rolling power blackouts, the tourists are staying away in droves, and Sri Lanka, already wracked by corruption and COVID, spiraled out of control.

The public's response? Even though the fertilizer ban had already been partially rolled back, just last month Rajapaksa's presidential palace was stormed by thousands of everyday Sri Lankans and he had to flee the country - last word was that he was holed up in Singapore.

(Side note to Nancy Pelosi and Liz Cheney - this is what an actual insurrection looks like:)



It seems Kermit was right – it ain’t easy being green.

But, considering the state’s claim to be the global leader in fighting climate change, can California – with its extremely powerful “climate lobby” that was able to ban the future sales of new gas-powered vehicles, a concept that would have been unthinkable a *very* few years ago – be far behind?

California’s commitment to confronting climate change cannot be underestimated., as proven by the 86 different climate partnerships, or “bilateral and multilateral agreements with national and subnational leaders” the state as entered into. (The list can be found [here](#))

Additionally, a quick tour of state department websites finds numerous examples of “green,” “sustainability,” and “climate” pages and plans; even the state’s prisons get into the act with its climate change plan: see [this](#).

It should be stressed that California is not above shooting itself in the foot when it comes to climate issues. Thursday, the legislature passed a bill mandating 3,200-foot “buffer zones” around all – new and existing – oil and gas wells, a move which would practically eliminate the industry – and its 13,000 jobs – in the state.

And last week, the plan to completely ban the sale of gas-powered vehicles by 2035 was approved by the state’s Air Resources Board. Yesterday, with the already strained power grid facing massive heat-related shortfalls, Californians were asked, among other things, to not charge their electric cars (about 11 percent of the cars in the state) when they got home from work.

A fertilizer ban could have similar severe knock-on impacts, and massive unemployment and other serious disruptions akin to those Sri Lanka experienced could follow.

While there is no specific proposed legislation currently, Governor Gavin Newsom often

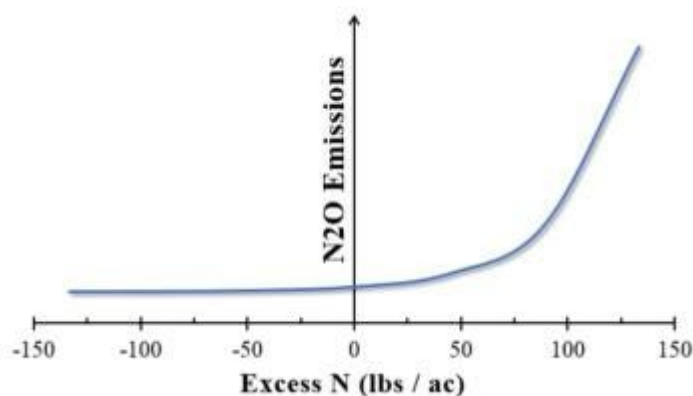
touts his climate bona fides which could leave the door open to future efforts. “No challenge poses a greater threat to our way of life, prosperity, and future as a state than climate change,” said Newsom on Earth Day in April, more than a year into the Sri Lanka debacle. “With our rich natural heritage on the front lines of this crisis, California is building on our global climate leadership with bold strategies that harness the power of nature to fight climate change and protect our communities and ecosystems.”

Considering the state’s political landscape, it appears the unthinkable could already starting to be thought.

For background, the push to ban or restrict the use of manufactured fertilizers (in other words, not compost or manure) was formerly mostly tied to waterway protection (as the former Mayor of Lake Elsinore, Cal. I can personally attest to the kind of rapid growth – in our case sadly algae – nitrogen and phosphorus can spur in plants. PS – since the city and other agencies started large-scale remediation efforts, the lake has been wonderfully clear).

The current push, however, revolves around climate change and is based on the claim that nitrogen is a greenhouse gas so farmers should stop putting it on their plants. While this claim is misleading – defining nitrogen as a greenhouse gas is rather new and shaky itself, the overwhelming majority of nitrogen in fertilizers is captured by the plant itself or the soil, and modern farming techniques have greatly reduced the problem of “over fertilizing” – it has not stopped climate change activists from pushing massive restrictions and, in Sri Lanka’s case, outright bans.

It is true, however, that nitrous dioxide – it’s not that stuff you inhale at the dentist’s office – is considered a greenhouse gas and that it can be produced by fertilizer application. However, since the crops and soil capture so much, it only is produced in significant quantity if far too much fertilizer is used, a practice the majority of farmers eschew because it is usually unnecessary and always more expensive – fertilizer isn’t free and can add up to about 5 percent of a farm’s expenses. Here is a graph showing the impacts of over-fertilization and the minimal emissions (essentially indistinguishable from the “background noise”) when used typically and properly:



(From the University of California’s Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources and can be found [here](#)).

In the Netherlands, farmers have taken to the streets to protest planned government (and European Union) mandated nitrogen use cuts of up to 70 percent. Such cuts would devastate the agricultural sector, which currently makes the tiny country the second largest

exporter of farm products in the world (only the United States exports more food). Due to the impact on livestock feed costs and availability, it is estimated that – in addition to massive crop losses – about 30 percent of Dutch farm animals would have to be killed to meet the climate change target.

Canada is also proposing nationwide nitrogen cuts of up to 30 percent, leaving farmers there worried about their futures and the continued assurance of the nation's food supply.

The impact nitrogen fertilizers have on the atmosphere – which is already about 78 percent nitrogen – is so small it cannot be accurately measured (see graph above), said Dr. Jay Lehr, environmental scientist and agricultural economist.

“I can see why certain politicians are attracted to the idea, but it's just too crazy,” Lehr said, adding that if the United States and/or California were to mimic Sri Lanka it would lead to “starvation and desperation” and the bankrupting of the majority of farmers. “This movement is trying to roll-back the green revolution.”

The green revolution Lehr referred to has nothing to do with the current political meaning of the term “green,” but the post-World War II movement to increase yields through improved crops, fertilizer use, technological enhancements, irrigation, and scientifically-sound farming practices. The movement is credited with literally saving more than a billion lives around the globe in the past 70 years and led to one of its chief architects, Norman Borlaug – who famously said “You can't build a peaceful world on empty stomachs” – to being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Borlaug's revolution is a very specific target of many climate activists and the various international government agencies and NGOs that support them.

In its position paper entitled “Strengthening agroecology for a fundamental Transformation of agri-food systems,” the World Future Council – a German-based NGO/think tank – states: “The message has now gotten through: the negative effects of industrial agriculture have long been clear; they include water shortages, species extinction, high greenhouse-gas emissions, soil degradation, and land grabbing. They cause social, economic and ecological damage that harms the livelihoods of peasants.” (You can visit the website [here](#))

Borlaug may have passed away in 2009, but his quote regarding such groups seems apropos:

“Some of the environmental lobbyists of the Western nations are the salt of the earth, but many of them are elitists. They've never experienced the physical sensation of hunger. They do their lobbying from comfortable office suites in Washington or Brussels. If they lived just one month amid the misery of the developing world, as I have for fifty years, they'd be crying out for tractors and fertilizer and irrigation canals and be outraged that fashionable elitists back home were trying to deny them these things.”

Another international group, the Global Green Growth Initiative (the GGGI, a treaty-based organization that works with the UN where it has “Observer” status, like the Red Cross) praised Sri Lanka two years before its ban went into place for its three-year climate change plan. To quote the GGGI:

“GGGI welcomed the Government of Sri Lanka as its thirtieth Member in January 2019, committing to support the country as it asserts its commitment to achieving its

sustainable development and NDC goals. As Sri Lanka's delivery partner for the 3-year GCF-National Adaptation Planning (NAP) Readiness Support Program, GGGI will support Sri Lanka's NDC on adaptation by further strengthening its adaptation planning process and capacity to implement NAP. It also aims to enhance the country's access to climate finance for the implementation of its national adaptation plan. Working towards 6 sub-outcomes through 20 key outputs, the project's target impact is a built resilience of the most vulnerable sectors and communities in Sri Lanka to adverse effects of Climate Change through Sri Lanka's strengthened capacity to implement National Adaptation Planning." (note – this quote is repeated in its entirety to give the reader a better flavor of the incomprehensible "citizen of the world/corporate speak" most of these endeavors evince. For more on the GGGI, you can read its "gender and inclusive development" policy statement [here](#)).

The GGGI, like many other NGOs and government agencies – and some very major financial players like BlackRock (the \$10 trillion asset management fund) – see "sustainability" and its related ESG rating (like a bond rating except for non-financial aspects of a company or country) as integral components of investing strategies, grant and credit worthiness, and the like. This pressure to please the international money (and government) people is a significant driver of initiatives such as Sri Lanka undertook and the Netherlands and Canada are currently considering.

'If the goal is to kill California agriculture, ESG is a very effective way to do it,' said James Taylor, president of the Heartland Institute.

Despite the obvious catastrophe, even Sri Lankan activists are not giving up. The Green Movement of Sri Lanka – supported internationally by the European Union, etc. – seems to embody much of movement's zeitgeist and remains committed to the cause, with the website reading, in part: "Friends, sustainability is complex and requires a fundamental kindness and empathy among its proponents. Therefore, let us not work with the stupidity of industrial age mindsets in our ongoing effort to shift to sustainability. We do not have to agree but at the very least, let us agree not to disagree." This debate-shuttering "agreeing to not disagree" idea is a sentiment shared by much of the activist movement, no matter the country. (note – you can find out more [here](#))

Back in the United States, American Farm Bureau Federation Chief Economist Dr. Roger Cryan estimates that a Sri Lank-style move would cut domestic grain crop production by about 50 percent within two to four years of implementation, leading to massive price hikes and acute shortages of basic commodities.

"Feeding the world is not an easy thing to do," Cryan said. "Sri Lanka was clearly a failure."

After re-iterating the fact that, given its uptake into plants and the soil "nitrogen and phosphorus do not represent a greenhouse gas problem, Cryan also noted that if Sri Lanka's overnight organic model were followed that there is simply "not enough manure and compost on the planet" to make up the difference to keep crop yields steady.

"I'd hate to see something done if they don't do the math," Cryan said. "We shouldn't be talking about farming less – it can't be a trade-off."

The impact in California, home to \$50 billion agricultural industry and about 12 percent of the nation's entire farming output, would be devastating.

A.G. Kawamura, an Orange County farmer, former Secretary of the California Department of Food and Agriculture, and co-chair of Solutions From the Land, an international, UN-backed group dedicated to “increasing agricultural productivity (including ecosystem services and societal benefits) and incomes; adapting and building resilience; and reducing and removing greenhouse gas emissions” expressed doubt that many climate activists truly comprehend the complexities of farming.

“It’s the nightmare of the good intentions of the activists who don’t understand how the food supply system works,” Kawamura said. “They either can’t understand or will not understand because it doesn’t play with the people who pay them.”

Eliminating manufactured fertilizers from the agriculture equation removes a “tool to keep the system robust and when you start taking away tools it becomes challenging if not impractical to continue,” Kawamura said.

With the world’s eight billionth person expected to be born in November, Kawamura strongly believes that protecting the capacity to feed people is paramount.

“Abundance allows for choices,” said Kawamura. “It allows for organic farming, it allows for ‘laboratory meat,’ it creates the space to innovate.” But scarcity leads to a mere state of survival, effectively closing off those avenues, he warned.

Kawamura added that a fertilizer ban would “collapse the production curve” in California within about three years of implementation.

As for the possibility of the enactment of severe restrictions, while Lehr believes California farmers are likely politically powerful enough (unlike Sri Lankan farmers) to forestall such a move, Kawamura is less sanguine.

“The legislature and this governor do not appear to prioritize agriculture,” Kawamura said. “For years, farmers haven’t been negotiating (in Sacramento) to get more, but just to lose less.”

California growers harvest more than 400 different types of crops – many what are referred to as specialty – that each have differing fertilizer needs and protocols so the impacts of its loss would vary widely, though a flat statewide ban would be catastrophic no matter the crop. Farmers in other states that concentrate on grain and other staple crops would face yield losses of up to 60 percent across the board if draconian fertilizer restrictions or bans were put in place.

The dream of an organic-only farming world is a chimera anyway, said Bjorn Lomborg, President of the Copenhagen Consensus (a group that acknowledges anthropogenic climate change but believes the approaches being currently taken to combat it are misguided) and Visiting Fellow at Stanford University’s Hoover Institution.

“Long simply a fashionable trend for the world’s 1%, environmental activists have increasingly peddled the beguiling idea that organic farming can solve hunger,” Lomborg said. “However, research conclusively shows that organic farming produces much less food than conventional farming per hectare. Moreover, organic farming requires farmers to rotate soil out of production for pasture, fallow or cover crops, reducing its effectiveness. In total, organic approaches produce between a quarter and half less food than conventional, scientific-driven agriculture.”

Lomborg added that these facts “not only makes organic food more expensive, but it means that organic farmers would need much more land to feed the same number of people as today – possibly almost twice the area. Given that agriculture currently uses 40% of Earth’s ice-free land, switching to organics would mean destroying large swathes of nature for less effective production.”

Should California – or the nation – take the path of most destruction and implement restrictions or even fertilizer bans, the social and economic impacts would be catastrophic and could hearken back to the conditions during the Great Depression of the 1930s – except this time there wouldn’t be any bread lines because there wouldn’t be any bread.

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