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Jewish Agricultural Colonization in Entre Rios, Argentina, I

Some Social and Economic Aspects of a Venture in Resettlement

BY MORTON D. WINSBERG

Introduction

BY THE END of the nineteenth century living conditions for the Jews in East Europe had become intolerable. Jews had settled there in large numbers centuries before, after having been forced from West Europe by increasing anti-Semitism. The East European nobility encouraged their migration eastward, because it saw in the Jews an instrument for keeping the bulk of the population employed as peasants on their large estates. The nobility encouraged the Jews to enter petty commerce, thus endeavoring to restrict them to an intermediary position between the privileged aristocracy and the landless peasantry. When actual encouragement was insufficient to enforce this rigid social and economic stratification, the nobility prevented Jews from owning land, from entering certain professions, such as agriculture, and even from living in certain sections of the nation.

Parallel to the rise in anti-Semitism in the latter half of the nineteenth century, liberal political and economic ideas began to reach East Europe from the rapidly industrializing and more democratic west. The masses clamored for more political and economic freedom while the conservative nobility fought to retain its position. Though unable or unwilling to meet the demands of the people, the nobility was successful in shifting much of the responsibility for the lack of economic progress onto the Jews, who proved ideal scapegoats because they formed such a small minority that they were unable to defend themselves. In addition, since the Jews had been engaged in direct commerce with the peasants for centuries, the peasants found it easier to blame the Jews as the source of their poverty rather than the nobility.

Riots broke out in many East European countries as the masses turned on the Jews in their frustration, sometimes with the encouragements of their governments. Once again the Jews began to search for another haven of protection. Some chose to return to West Europe, where a favorable environment for Jewish settlement had recently been restored. Millions more chose to emigrate to other continents. Most came to the

United States, but considerable numbers settled in such far distant nations as South Africa and Argentina.¹

The first East European Jews to reach Argentina arrived in 1889. In that year 824 came as a group from the town of Kamenets Podolskiy in the Western Ukraine to establish an agricultural colony on land they thought available for sale to them in the center of the province of Santa Fe.² However, soon after their arrival a disagreement developed between the wealthy landowner and the Jewish colonists. This dispute was of such duration that the Jews, who arrived in Argentina with little capital, were reduced to actual starvation. Their plight came to the attention of a passing Swiss Jewish sanitarian who was in Argentina as a technical adviser to the government. He in turn cabled Baron Maurice de Hirsch, a West European Jewish financier and banker, who was perhaps the most important Jewish philanthropist of his day.

Though Baron de Hirsch immediately sent money for the temporary support of the impoverished Jews in Argentina, knowledge of their condition and their aspiration to farm prompted him to conceive one of the most unusual Jewish charitable organizations ever established: the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA). In 1891 de Hirsch invested £2 million sterling into his association, and later increased this amount to £8 million. This investment permitted the association to begin a land purchase program which, though mainly confined to Argentina, also included purchases in Brazil, the United States, and Canada.³ In Argentina alone, between 1891 and 1932, by taking advantage of periods when land prices were depressed, the JCA acquired almost 1,500,000 acres. From this land eleven colonies were eventually formed which at their peak had a total of 33,000 Jewish residents.

The Jewish Colonization Association became de Hirsch's principal charity, though he continued to give massive support to many others before his death in 1896. Through the JCA he felt he could encourage the migration of millions of Jews from East Europe to the Western Hemisphere and resettle them on the land. The idea of establishing a

¹ For a complete account of this migration see: Mark Wischnitzer, *To Dwell in Safety* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1948).

² José Mendelson, "Genesis de la Colonia Judía en la Argentina," in *50 Años de Colonización Judía en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: DAIA, 1939) pp. 85-142.

³ In the United States and Canada the principal charity of Baron de Hirsch was the Baron de Hirsch Fund. The fund was established for basically the same purpose as the Jewish Colonization Association, to resettle East European Jews on farms. Several colonies were established, the largest at Woodbine, New Jersey. Through one of its divisions, the Jewish Agricultural Society, the fund made loans to Jewish farmers throughout the United States and Canada as well as encouraged farm cooperatives. The society's work had considerable impact on Christian rural life movements in both countries.

middle-class Jewish farming population in the Western Hemisphere especially appealed to him, because he believed that only through the primary occupation of agriculture could there be, in his words, "a moral and physical regeneration" of East European Jewry, a group which for centuries had been engaged mainly in secondary and tertiary occupations.⁴

I

Land Acquisition

THE JCA COLONIES were generally established in the less attractive agricultural regions of the country, because most of the best land in Argentina had entered the private domain years before, and either was not for sale or was too expensive. Taking advantage of a brief economic depression in 1890, the JCA began purchasing large tracts of land, in some cases entire ranches, on the outer margin of the fertile humid Pampa. Among its largest purchases were those made in the province of Entre Rios. Here, between 1892 and 1932, were acquired 571,682 acres, or 40 per cent of all the land under its control in Argentina. In a province which is only slightly smaller than the state of South Carolina, its holdings exceeded 3 per cent of the total area of the province.

The initial purchases of the JCA in Entre Rios were the largest it was to make within the province. (See Figure 1.) In 1892 it acquired a number of separate properties between the Guleguay and Guleguaychú Rivers totaling approximately 125,000 acres. Using these purchases as a base, the colony of Clara was established in 1892, Lucienville in 1894, and Santa Isabel in 1908. Land continued to be available in Entre Rios at a reasonable price during the early twentieth century. By 1904 the association had added nearly 200,000 more acres to Clara, bringing it to its full size, 253,701 acres. In 1901 roughly 80,000 acres were added to Santa Isabel and over 50,000 acres to Lucienville in 1902, bringing these two colonies to their full size—118,124 acres and 100,399 acres respectively. After it had completed its purchases in eastern Entre Rios the association continued to augment its holdings in the western part of of the province. In 1892 it had purchased 22,830 acres near the town of Hasenkamp, from which it established the colony of Oungre in 1925. Between 1930 and 1932 it purchased an additional 34,186 acres east of, but not contiguous to, Oungre. The colony of Cohen, administered jointly with Oungre, was established on this land in 1937. In 1932 the JCA made its last major purchase in Entre Rios, 42,441 acres, just to the

⁴ Baron de Hirsch, "My Views on Philanthropy," *North American Review*, 416 (July, 1891), p. 3.

north of the recently purchased Cohen tract. The colony of Avigdor was formed here in 1936.

The land purchased by the association has at best only marginal value for agriculture. The site of Lucienville is a narrow, moderately eroded interfluvium between the Guauguay and Guauguaychú Rivers. The four noncontiguous tracts which form Santa Isabel have extensive areas of poorly drained land, as does much of the eastern portion of Clara. Both Avigdor and Cohen-Oungre are situated on one of Entre Rios's *cuchillas*. These low, erosional ridges, not related to the taller, structural ridges of granite with the same name in Uruguay, have hundreds of short streams flowing from their flanks. As a result of the situation of both Avigdor and Cohen-Oungre in relation to a *cuchilla*, their surfaces are broken by many steep-walled streams and arroyos. Clara, more than any of the other four JCA colonies within Entre Rios, has a topography conducive to agriculture. With the exception of the previously mentioned poorly drained eastern section, the colony at its worst is only gently rolling.

The climate of all the Entre Rios colonies may be classified as Humid Subtropical. No colony is immune from frost, though it is not of common occurrence since the colonies are situated on the equatorward margin of the climatic zone. Typical January average temperatures are 75°F. to 80°F., while those of July are between 50°F. and 55°F. Precipitation varies from 43" annually in the eastern colonies to 38" in the western. There is no distinct dry season, though there is a summer maximum in precipitation. High summer temperatures stimulate rapid evaporation and reduce the effectiveness of the precipitation. In addition, during the summer much of the precipitation reaches the ground in the form of torrential showers. In those parts of the colonies where tight clay soils are present, the ground is incapable of absorbing the precipitation rapidly. As a result, the water is carried off along the surface, often causing severe erosion. All the colonies suffer periodic droughts, though the problem is far less serious than in farming areas to the west of the Paraná River. Other climatic problems which have caused crop failure or damage within the colonies are early and late frosts, hailstorms, and windstorms.

As in Buenos Aires, prairie soils are found throughout Entre Rios. However, because of greater precipitation and higher temperatures they are more leached and alluviated, and consequently are considerably lower in natural fertility. When first put to agricultural use Entre Rios soils normally have sufficient natural fertility to permit profitable crop yields for a number of years, not withstanding other natural hazards. However, under continuous cropping without fertilization, their fertility

declines sharply. Agricultural experts are in general agreement that most of the soils of the province are best suited for pasture, but economic factors in the JCA colonies usually have dictated crop production instead of livestock. As a result, the fertility of the soils of all the colonies has declined from earlier days, and in some of the more undulating portions of the colonies, especially where the soils are fine in texture, enhancing surface runoff, the natural process of water erosion has been greatly stimulated by poor land management.⁵

The natural vegetation in all the colonies imposed a serious obstacle to their early settlement. All five colonies are situated in a zone of savanna-like natural vegetation, known in Argentina as *monte*. When first settled by the Jewish immigrants the upland portion of the colonies was covered by drought- and heat-resistant grasses low in nutritive value for livestock. Interspersed about the grassy upland were clumps of low, xerophytic trees of little commercial value. Among the more common species were the ñandubay (*Prosopis ñandubay*), the black and white algarrobo (*Prosopis nigra* and *alba*), and the caranday and yatay palms (*Trithrinax campestris* and *Butia yatay*). In the lower and more poorly drained areas, the ceiba (*Erythrina crista-galli*) and the sauce criollo (*Salix Humboldtiana*) abounded. The extremely hard wood of the ñandubay and the algarrobos so successfully resisted the ax that it cost the association and the colonists considerable effort and expense to clear them from the land, though the softer caranday and yatay palms were quickly removed. Even today the gnarled and quite unattractive ñandubay and black and white algarrobo are plentiful in all the colonies.⁶

II

Population

By 1892, the year in which the first JCA colony was opened for colonization in Entre Rios, the emigration of Jews from East Europe had reached alarming proportions. Driven by increasingly vitriolic outbreaks of anti-Semitism in Russia, thousands of Jews were waiting at border crossings to leave the country or had crowded into West European ports, waiting to go mainly to the United States or Palestine. The majority of these migrants left Russia with little capital, and many were forced to depend on the charity of their more affluent co-religionists once they reached West Europe.

⁵ José F. Felquer, *Geografía de Entre Rios* (Paraná: Consejo General de Educación, 1962), p. 56.

⁶ J. R. Báez, "Reseña sobre las pasturas de Entre Rios," *Revista Argentina Agronomía*, 11 (March, 1944), pp. 129-42.

Cognizant of the physical danger faced by the Jews who lived in Russia, and also of the privation suffered by many in their attempts to migrate, Baron de Hirsch reached an agreement with the Czarist government

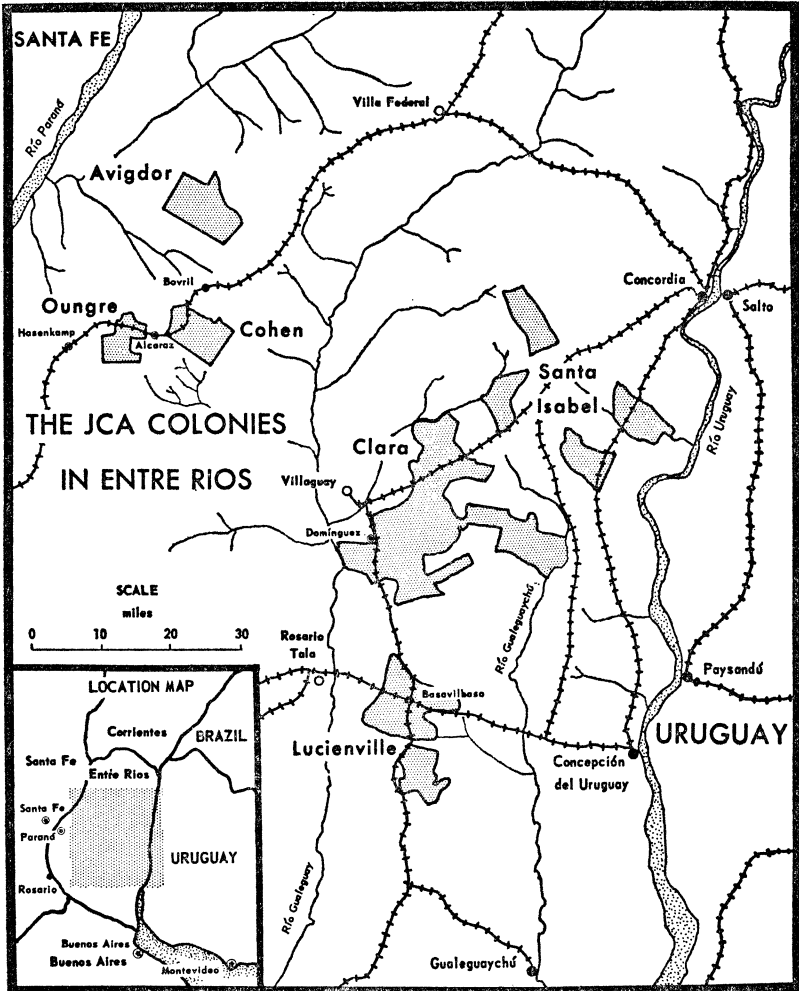


Figure 1. Map of the colonies of the Jewish Colonization Association in Entre Rios, Argentina.

whereby, in exchange for JCA assistance in helping Jews leave the country, the government would issue them passports or exit visas. De Hirsch's plans were enormous in scope, if not entirely practical. He

proposed to remove 25,000 Jews from Russia in 1892, bring them to the Western Hemisphere, and settle them on their own farms, principally in Argentina. The number of Jews he hoped to transport was expected to increase each year until 3,250,000, the majority of Russian Jewry, would have been brought out in twenty-five years.⁷

To transport such great numbers of urban people from one continent to another and install them on the land proved logistically impossible even for so rich and charitable an individual as Baron de Hirsch. In 1891 de Hirsch's agents began recruiting among the refugees waiting in German ports and in Constantinople. Yet instead of the 25,000 that the association originally hoped it would transport to the Western Hemisphere, it succeeded in sending 1,348, all to Argentina. The association never succeeded in sending a larger number of immigrants in any future year.

The first Jews to arrive in Entre Rios were selected mainly from among the 1,348 who arrived in 1891. In 1892, after a wait of several months until the association obtained a clear title to the property, they were installed in Clara, which had been named in honor of the wife of Baron de Hirsch. The original colonists were soon joined by others who chose to leave the group which was still waiting in Santa Fe for the resolution of the dispute over property it had come to Argentina in 1889 to colonize. By the end of 1892 a total of 244 colonists and their families had been settled within the colony, the largest number ever installed in one year in any JCA colony during the association's history.⁸

The Jews who reached Entre Rios to settle in the JCA colonies were not the first large group of foreigners to reach it, nor was agricultural colonization new to the province. Foreigners had been arriving in Entre Rios in large numbers since the 1870's, when immigration to Argentina became important. By 1895 the national census reported 22 per cent of the people living in the province were foreign-born. Though agricultural possibilities were poorer in Entre Rios than in Buenos Aires, they nevertheless could be equaled in few other provinces in the country. In addition, the large landowners of Entre Rios could be induced to sell their land more readily than those in Buenos Aires. Most Buenos Aires landowners recognized the enormous profit potentialities of their fertile estates and were only willing to enter into short-term leases with the im-

⁷ Simon Dubnow, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1918), Vol. II, p. 419.

⁸ Unless otherwise stated, all yearly population and economic statistics pertaining to the Jewish Colonization Association colonies were taken from the annual reports of the association.

migrants. In the last twenty-five years of the nineteenth century ethnic agricultural colonization grew important to Entre Rios. In 1872 the province reported only three colonies, but by 1895 that number had risen to 201, and the majority of these were inhabited by the foreign-born.⁹

In these early years JCA agents looked about East Europe for groups of Jews with agricultural experience who were willing to emigrate en masse to Argentina to farm. Jews trained in agriculture were a rarity in East Europe, but through another de Hirsch charity, trade schools were created in the region which, among other things, taught agriculture. It was hoped that some of those trained in agriculture in these schools would migrate to Argentina and settle in the colonies. In 1894 the association recruited several small groups of Jewish farmers from villages in Belorussia and Ukraine, transported them to Argentina, and settled them in Clara. In that same year Lucienville was founded. This colony, named after the deceased son of Baron de Hirsch, was originally settled by groups recruited from Poland, Belorussia, and the Ukraine.

Group migration and settlement by the JCA lasted only a short time and, in Entre Rios, was confined to the two oldest colonies, Clara and Lucienville. By 1904 the movement of Jews from East Europe had so intensified, and the fame of the Jewish Colonization Association had spread so far, that the association was finding it difficult to cope with all the immigrants who had come to Argentina at their own expense to settle in the colonies. Though many Jews settled in Argentine cities upon arrival, the JCA colonies were such a powerful attraction that as late as 1923 over 20 per cent of all Jews living in Argentina resided within them.

The movement of immigrants to the Entre Rios colonies was so great that in 1896, four years after the establishment of the first colony, over 4,000 Jews were living in Clara and almost 1,000 in Lucienville. Since the JCA tried to select only the best prospects for colonization, the majority of residents gained a precarious existence doing odd jobs in the villages or working as agricultural laborers for those who had already been granted farms. To those that the association believed had potentialities but who were not assigned farms, a lot of twenty-five acres was granted. Here a person could acquire agricultural experience by raising vegetables or livestock under the direct supervision of the association while he gained the majority of his income working as a laborer for a colonist.

In most years between 1892 and 1914 the colonies grew in population.

⁹ James Scobie, *Revolution on the Pampha* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), p. 46.

(See Figure 2.) Jews were arriving in Argentina in continually greater numbers as economic instability mounted in Europe with the approach of World War I. Not only did Jews continue to pour out of Russia and Poland, but many began to arrive from the Balkan countries, especially Rumania. In 1914 there were 11,761 Jewish inhabitants living in the Entre Rios colonies; 7,699 in Clara, 2,995 in Lucienville, and 1,067 in

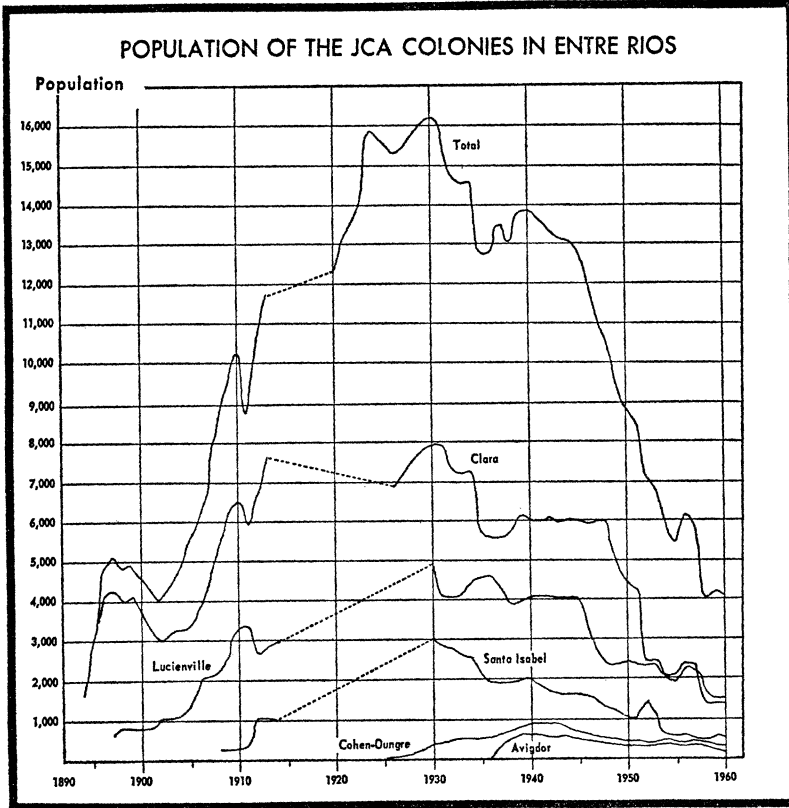


Figure 2. Population of the colonies of the Jewish Colonization Association in Entre Rios, Argentina, 1889-1960.

Santa Isabel. The latter colony was founded in 1908 from four non-contiguous tracts approximately thirty miles southwest of Concordia.

By 1914 the war in Europe had brought immigration to Argentina virtually to a halt. This had an immediate effect on the growth of population in the colonies, and though no figures are available to substantiate it, there must have been years where more people abandoned the colonies

than arrived. During the early period of colonization there always was a large "floating" population within all the colonies. Most of this floating population was formed by people who were hoping eventually to qualify for a grant of land or had come to live there because they felt more comfortable in the homogeneous Jewish environment. Few in this group felt any real permanent attachment to the colony they were living in, and after a few years, if they had not obtained land, they generally left to go to the city.

Immediately after the end of World War I immigration to Argentina, and consequently to the Entre Rios colonies, quickly reached its prewar intensity. Until 1929, in almost every year, the colonies grew in size. Though many people were still leaving them, each year more were arriving from abroad than were abandoning them. After 1923, the year the United States enacted the policy of restrictive immigration quotas, many Jews who originally planned to go to the United States went to Argentina instead. However, by the middle of the 1920's Argentina also had begun to implement a quota system designed to favor the entrance of people destined to work in agriculture rather than urban occupations. Many Jewish immigrants with plans to live in an Argentine city found that the only way they could enter the country was to go first to live in one of the agricultural colonies.

The world depression which began in 1929 brought an end to large-scale Jewish immigration to Argentina. From 1931 the population of the Entre Rios colonies has been in an almost constant decline up to the present day. The trend was briefly arrested between 1936 and 1941, when the JCA settled German Jewish refugees in the two western colonies, Cohen-Oungre and Avigdor. The former colony, named for a director-general (Cohen) and a president (Oungre) of the association, was established in 1925. Avigdor, named after an earlier member of the association's board of directors, was founded in 1936 specifically to accept the German Jews who had begun to arrive.

After the war the survivors of the Nazi extermination of the Jews mainly chose to migrate to Palestine. Those who came to Argentina usually settled in the cities. Cut off from a fresh supply of immigrants, and with a steady emigration of the residents of the colonies to the cities, the five Entre Rios colonies now hold only a small percentage of the people they once held. In 1960 Clara had only 1,590 Jewish residents compared to its peak year, 1920, when it held 8,662. Lucienville held 1,465 compared to a 1931 peak of 4,939. Santa Isabel fell from a 1930 maximum of 3,155 to 582 in 1960. In 1940 Cohen-Oungre reached its greatest population, 968 Jewish inhabitants, whereas by 1960 it had de-

clined to 294. Avigdor reached its maximum Jewish population only four years after it was established, in 1940. At that time it held 660, whereas in 1960 the figure stood at 213. This decline in Jewish population was not restricted to the Entre Rios colonies, but has been a feature of all the association colonies. In 1960 only 3 per cent of the entire Argentine Jewish population was living in the eleven colonies of that nation.

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(Continued)

A New Approach to Urban Renewal

ANYONE VITALLY INTERESTED in urban renewal should also be interested in a *new* approach to that problem, especially when this approach has succeeded in other countries.

Obviously something new is needed. Billions in taxes have been funneled into urban renewal and the problem of urban rehabilitation is as much with us as ever. Magazines are full of articles on urban sprawl, urban blight, slums, zooming local taxes and indebtedness. Why is it that practically no American industry needs governmental help to meet the needs of consumers—except for the gigantic home construction industry? Publicly sponsored urban renewal programs are needed. Yet wouldn't some new thinking about these problems be refreshing?

A proposal, land value taxation, which is supported by many prominent urban renewal experts, is simple enough. It advocates the gradual exemption of improvements from real estate taxation combined with a heavier tax on land.

One may wonder what this can possibly accomplish. It has accomplished a great deal in Australia and New Zealand where this tax has been used extensively. For instance, approximately 60 New Zealand communities have switched from a real estate tax to the land value tax since the end of World War II; according to one observer, the idea is spreading like wild fire. Interestingly, at least 30 per cent of the *property owners* in New Zealand must sign a petition favoring land value taxation and only property owners can vote in the final election. Evidently, there must be some genuine advantages to them in transferring the tax burden from houses and improvements to land values. At present, all improvements are tax free in 85 per cent of the urban areas in New Zealand and in 70 per cent of the rural areas; three-fourths of all the local tax revenue is levied on the land alone. And the trend is continuing.

In Australia, the situation is much the same. Every month brings