Farmers Must Be Weaned Off Using Oil, Says U.N. Expert
By CAROLINE HENSHAW

LONDON—Reducing farmers’ dependence on oil will be key to feeding the world’s rapidly expanding population in the face of climate change and rising fuel prices, the United Nations' special rapporteur on food said Tuesday.

In an interview to coincide with the release of his report on feeding the world in the 21st century, Olivier De Schutter said promoting natural production techniques is the only sustainable way to guard against future crises and stop food prices increasing in-line with oil.

"We set up our farming techniques in the 1920s when we thought there would be a never-ending supply of cheap oil," he said. "Now we are facing a situation where expensive oil and gas and the influence of climate change on yields are scaring us.

"Developing farming in a way which makes it less addicted to fossil energy is much more promising. In developing countries, we may have to leapfrog the stage of industrial agriculture and find ways to produce that are less addicted to fossil fuels."

Developing new ways to feed the world has become increasingly pressing in the past year as record-high global food prices have pushed an extra 44 million people into poverty, according to World Bank estimates.

Fears of a crisis similar to the widespread unrest of 2007-08 have grown since the price of oil surged to highs seen 29 months ago due to violence in the Middle East.

"The oil factor, which has so far not been a driving factor this season, could become an element like it was in 2008," said senior economist with the U.N.’s Food and Agriculture Organization Abdolreza Abbassian.

The second price-spike in four years has propelled food security to the top of the international agenda. But while the immediate causes can be blamed on poor 2010 world harvests, observers warn that a broader structural shift is underway as producers struggle to increase world output by 70% over the next 40 years to feed what is expected to be a population of nine billion.

Experts agree that finding ways to boost the output of Africa’s 80 million smallholder farmers will be crucial. What they disagree on is how.

Many argue that genetically modified crops and more powerful technology—continuing the methods of the "Green Revolution" of the last century—is the way forward.

But Mr. De Schutter disagrees. Instead he says ecological methods which enhance soils productivity and protect crops against pests by relying on beneficial trees, plants, animals and insects will be more sustainable and effective by helping boost production in emerging nations, where demand is greatest.

"There has been an attempt to relaunch the new agricultural revolution these days but its really very financially unsustainable for farmers," he said. "Those who are hungry today are those who have very small farms to cultivate. We need to help them to produce in ways without expensive agricultural inputs."

Presented to the U.N.’s Human Rights Council Tuesday, the report cites evidence showing "agro-ecology" techniques increased crop yields by 80% in 57 developing countries, and on average more than doubled all African schemes. In projects in 20 African countries, output doubled in three to 10 years.

At the same time, research found that farmers needed to pay for fewer inputs. Projects in Indonesia, Vietnam and Bangladesh recorded 35%-92% reductions in insecticide use on rice, while in cotton production in China, India and Pakistan, farmers cut pesticide use 34%-66% while improving yields by 4-14%.

Copyright 2011 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved
This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our Subscriber Agreement and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com

Finance & Accounting Jobs

Personal Banker Pleasant Hill Downtown - Citigroup Inc.
Hyperion Planning Consultant - Robert Half Management Resources
Financial Director - Robert Half International
Financial Analyst III - Mergis Group