

## **Azerbaijan Harvest a Washout**

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This year's floods have compounded the problems facing the agricultural industry.

Bad weather has struck another blow to Azerbaijan's farmers, who are already struggling to cope with land reforms and mounting expenses.

A rainy spring and flooding has wiped out much of the expected harvest. "Torrential rain in April swept away around one hectare of wheat which had only just started growing," said Kamal Shabanov, a 29-year old farmer in the northern Kusal region.

"Some of the crops were on the slope of the hill which the mudflow passed down, and everything died."

Like most of his fellow-farmers, Shabanov said that his harvest this year would only be two thirds of what it was last year and none of them would get compensation.

According to Azerbaijan's agriculture minister Irshad Aliev, the country's farming industry has sustained losses of 30 million US dollars as a result of the bad weather. Everything from fruit orchards to cotton fields and potato harvests suffered, but the worst losses were to grain crops.

The only crop that did well by the rain was rice, which thrives in humid conditions. However, the ministry estimates that the amount produced will still only equal last year's level of 16,700 tons - which is less than half of what the country consumes.

According to some analysts, the crisis shows that farmers in Azerbaijan are too vulnerable and there is a need for further reforms of the agricultural sector.

"Farmers should adapt to western standards of agricultural management and we ought to help in every way we can," Professor Amin Babayev, head of the Ganje Agribusiness Association told IWPR. He said that for example farmers had poor quality seeds, which could not compete in international markets.

Six years ago, Azerbaijan was one of the first post-Soviet countries to undergo agrarian reform and allow the sale of agricultural land. But the process left many farmers unhappier than before.

"The speed of reform is no indicator of quality," said Babayev. "The land and the people who work on it cannot endure sharp changes. When they gave up land to private ownership they did not teach peasant farmers how to manage it well or use it productively...People simply don't know where to start."

Babayev proposes reducing the number of Azerbaijani farms, leaving behind agricultural conglomerates, which should result in greater reliability and security for the farmers.

Azer Humbatov, a specialist with the USAID-funded organisation CredAgro, agrees. "It is hard for farmers on their own to rent out equipment to work on personal plots which do not exceed two to five hectares," he said.

“The land is split up and that means efforts are diffused and equipment is not used efficiently.”

Then there is the problem of securing loans. Sums up to 30,000 dollars attract interest rates of 16 to 18 per cent, and farmers have to provide security in the form of property, a car or equipment - which can cost far more than the sum they are trying to acquire. CredAgro has since formed a credit union to give farmers a better deal.

The industry faces further difficulties when the harvest is brought in. Ilhar Mamedov, deputy head of the opposition National Independence Party of Azerbaijan, said, “Mafia structures linked to state bureaucrats essentially set up customs barriers between regions, control the purchase of the harvest and force the producers to sell for next to nothing.

“Many people do not put up with the pressure for long. They leave agriculture and go to earn money in the cities - and most of them end up in Russia.”

Babayev estimates that nearly a third of the working-age male population in the west of the republic is working in Russia and sending money home to their families. And this may be the biggest threat to the future of Azerbaijani agriculture - a lack of farmers.

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**Location:** Stavropol  
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