

Karakalpak Farmers Face Bankruptcy

Author: [Marina Ildusova](#)

The authorities appear to have had ample time to prevent the failure of the republic's vital melon crop.

Government incompetence appears to have contributed to the destruction of this year's melon harvest in the western autonomous republic of Karakalpakstan.

IWPR has discovered that while local agricultural specialists learned as early as last spring that the voracious melon fly posed a danger to the crop, the authorities took no action. The pest went on to devastate almost half of the 44,500 hectares planted.

Instead of protecting the melons, the Karakalpak government focused on researching pests threatening cotton production that accounts for around half of Uzbekistan's export revenue. And there's now a very real risk that the insect blamed for devastating the melon harvest will now turn its attention to the cotton harvest.

The failure of the former is sure to cause terrible problems for the autonomous republic's 1.5 million citizens. The fruit is a staple during the summer and autumn months and the Karakalpak store it - fresh and dried - for use during the rest of the year.

Many farmers specialising in the crop are now facing bankruptcy. Bazarbai Nazarbekov is one. He took out a loan to plant melons on his southern farm, only to see his entire crop spoiled. "What will we live on now? I had hoped to sell my fruit, and have some left over for autumn, but it all came to nothing," he said.

Nazarbekov told IWPR that he and other local farmers had no prior warning that the melon fly - which has long posed a threat to local agriculture but has never before appeared in such numbers - was on its way.

According to information IWPR has received, the Karakalpak plant quarantine inspectorate - which is responsible for the inspection of crops - alerted the republic's authorities to the presence of melon fly larvae in the south of the republic more than a year ago. Yet no action was taken, with the government seemingly prepared to leave farmers to deal with the problem.

Maman Kaipbergenov of the Karakalpak agriculture ministry denied that his department was to blame. Instead, he blamed the state's laboratory service, which is tasked with sorting out crop problems. The latter admits that the melon fly threat was treated as a low priority. "There are a number of other pests in the republic which can do tremendous damage, so the problem of the melon fly was put off until next year," said one of the service's senior officials, Orynbai Ametov.

The authorities only began to examine ways of combating the melon fly this August when they noticed that it was beginning to attack cotton crops.

Now, the big concern is whether the spoiled fruit poses a health risk, as it's been rumoured that several people have been poisoned by rotten melon.

Karakalpak quarantine inspectorate director Polat Allamuratov told IWPR that preventative measures should be taken to protect the public, with the spoilt crop - which can only be identified by tiny black

punctures on its rind - removed from sale and buried.

The fate of next year's crop is already causing some anxiety. A spokesperson from the agriculture ministry told IWPR that another harvest may be lost if sufficient funds are not set aside to find a way to tackle the pest.

Time may be running out, as if the melon fly does move on to the cotton crop, the results will be disastrous for Karakalpakstan and Uzbekistan as a whole.

Marina Ildusova and Karina Insarova are the pseudonyms of IWPR journalists in Nukus

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