

Kazaks Kick Up Stink Over Manure Tax

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Farmers' fury at tax on animal dung prompts concession from the authorities.

The authorities in eastern Kazakstan have been forced to amend a bizarre new tax on manure only weeks after it was introduced.

The local assembly has agreed to limit the number of people expected to pay the new levy, following a campaign by one of the area's parliamentary deputies and a series of objections from impoverished farmers in the East Kazakstan region.

The draft law, which came into effect at the start of the year but is yet to be enforced, initially required all farmers with more than a thousand cattle to pay ten tenge (six US cents) for each ton of manure that's piled into unsightly heaps.

The authorities believe that the tax - when properly implemented - will clear the region's towns and villages of mounds of dung, which have built up over the years, threatening to contaminate the local water supply.

Officials hope to encourage farmers to use the animal waste as compost for their land rather than claim subsidies for artificial fertilisers.

"They stubbornly refuse to fertilise their fields with manure and demand subsidies to buy mineral fertilisers. They don't seem to realise that these stinking mountains are pure gold, and can be used to revitalise large areas of arable land," said Vasily Akhaev, speaker of the local assembly, and a cattle farmer himself.

But the population has reacted to the proposal with anger and dismay. "I have a hard enough time as it is feeding my herd, and now they're making me pay for shit," raged local farmer Almat Khamzin. "If they force me to do this, I'll slaughter all my cattle and then hang myself."

Only one deputy objected to the new law. Leonid Blok from Ust-Kamenogorsk who is also a chairman of the assembly's agricultural and natural conservation committee spoke out against the tax and has campaigned against it fiercely ever since. "I myself keep 2,500 head of cattle and I understand how the tax will affect poor farmers," he said

"Paying means wasting money that's been reserved for grain, feed and fuel. Taking the manure out to the fields to use as fertiliser means hiring a vehicle, which will be a further expense."

Blok's pressure, together with the outcry from local farmers, played a significant role in getting the authorities to amend the legislation, which will now only require peasants who have heaps of manure within 50 m of local water sources to pay the tax.

The deputy, who alleges that the authorities have introduced the levy to cover up budget deficits resulting, in part, from unnecessary expenditure on projects like a new regional governor residence in Astana, intends to continue his campaign to have the legislation repealed.

This may prove a far tougher task. Akhaev told IWPR that the regional governor Vitaly Mette had praised the deputies for their initiative and had backed the introduction of the levy.

The number of cattle in the region was rising all the time, Akhaev said, and every village was now dotted with stinking manure hills, covered in flies. "The dung seeps into streams and, from there, into the Irtysh river - the region's main source of water," he said.

However, ecologist Sanjar Ismailov argues that there is "nothing harmful" about the dunghills. "This is perfectly natural," he told IWPR. "Blaming manure for environmental damage caused by industrial waste and synthetic fertilisers is simply nonsense."

One Ust-Kamenogorsk deputy, who did not want to be named, told IWPR that as well as causing pollution, the mounds of manure damaged the reputation of the region and were a turn-off to potential financial backers.

"We need more investment in our industries. The tax on manure is a step toward improving the hygiene and appearance of the area - both important considerations to future investors," he said.

Feelings are still running high in the district, and there is a great deal of confusion over who will now have to pay the tax.

Sociologist Pyotr Rizenfeld warns that this may exacerbate an already tense situation in the poverty-stricken region, "Any unpopular measure threatens unpredictable consequences. The patience of the people is already being tested beyond breaking point, and their discontent may yet take the form of mass protests."

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