

## **Reaping an Unripe Harvest in Uzbekistan**

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Cumbersome state planning and a shortage of harvesting equipment means wheat is being gathered in before it is ready, just to meet deadlines.

Farmers in Uzbekistan are angry that due to pressure to meet state targets, as well as a shortage of farm machinery, officials are forcing them to gather the wheat crop before it has fully ripened.

On June 1, the wheat harvesting season began in Uzbekistan with local authorities dispatching combine harvesters to gather in the crop.

With over 120,000 farms in the country, agriculture plays an important role in the Uzbek economy and contributes about one third of gross domestic product.

Farmers who lease their land from the state are still subject to Soviet-style controls and production quotas for the staple wheat and the more profitable cotton.

In 2006, around six million tonnes of wheat were harvested and delivered to the state. According to forecasts from official media, the current harvest will be bigger than last year's, but there is no mention of the fact that a proportion of the grain will be poor quality because the ears have been cut before they are ripe.

Local authorities are under intense pressure to meet large crop quotas, and if they fail, then they can be reprimanded by central government and governors can even lose their jobs.

There is a shortage of both combine harvesters and the fuel to run them, so the regional authorities work to tight schedules, deciding when the crops should be harvested according to which areas have the most ripened wheat at any given time.

The harvesters are then sent out to the fields, each one accompanied by three policemen and a fireman to make sure the operation goes smoothly and the harvested crop is not stolen or sold privately by the farmer.

The few combine harvesters available must remain in operation continuously during the harvest season to get round all the country's farms.

Agricultural scientists say the tight schedule, combined with pressure on local authorities to be the first to meet government targets for grain production, means crops are regularly harvested before they have fully ripened.

The nature of irrigation systems in this largely arid country means that some patches of crops will get more water than others and will therefore ripen earlier.

“The combines are forced to gather the entire harvest in one area and only move on to other places afterwards... The second cause is that the regions compete to be the first to report that the state plan has been fulfilled,” said an agricultural expert in Bukhara, a city in western Uzbekistan.

Unripe crops have little value and while the state-monopoly purchasing centres are supposed to buy all the grain that farmers deliver, many of them reject unripe wheat or pay a lower price for it.

The urge to get harvesting over as quickly as possible is not just resulting in low-quality grain, but is not even a guarantee that a region like Bukhara will meet its production targets.

Bukhara’s Karaulbazar district, a flat, semidesert zone, is one of the country’s biggest wheat-producing areas. But by all accounts the crop is disappointing after a rush to bring it in. The harvesters have moved on to Shafirkan district, where unripe wheat is being cut along with the ripe.

One farmer from the Karaulbazar district, a sunburnt man of 50 in a cap turned grey from dust, said he found it frustrating to watch unripe wheat being cut, but realised that he needed the combine and that it would not be returning at a later date.

“If it weren’t for the combine, who would gather the crop – the people?” he said. “I have a large number of hectares of land under wheat. When a combine enters the field, it can’t separate the ripe from the unripe. This year, the same thing will happen,” he said.

Three years ago, this farmer came to the attention of the local authorities when he refused to allow harvesting to take place on his land. His attempt to delay the harvest lasted only a week.

“No, I didn’t let the combines in, because my wheat was not ripe. But the result was the same – the harvest was gathered anyway,” he said.

Farmers struggle to find a use for the unripe wheat they are left with, and either use it to feed animals or make poor quality bread out of it. They dry out the grains and try to ripen them a little more by spreading them out on the ground.

“It’s very hard to sell this grain. Either the animals will eat it, or it will rot in the barn,” said one local farmer.

Several years ago, farmers in Karaulbazar district interviewed by RFE/RL radio spoke about how unhappy they were with the restrictive rules they had to abide by for the harvest. That would be impossible now – since the Andijan violence of 2005, the Uzbek government has clamped down even further on attempts to express dissent.

“We’ve been forbidden to say we’re unhappy that grain is being cut from our fields before it ripens,” said another farmer from the district, who said he feared being called in by Uzbekistan feared National Security Service. “They control everything in the country now - even my dissatisfaction about my own harvest.”

The parcelling out of land from the old Soviet collective farms theoretically gave the new private farmers more control over their lives. But the state's retention of ownership of the land and the continuation of the "state order" system means the farmers remain dependent on the government.

"If this field really was mine and I didn't have to hand the wheat over to the state, I would be a millionaire now, not poor and bankrupt," said one man.

This system is unlikely to change, but the agricultural expert interviewed for this story offered one practical solution – the authorities should acquire more agricultural machinery for the centralised pools they lend out to farmers. The shortage of combine harvesters is, he argues, the main reason why wheat is reaped before it is ready.

"The equipment is good, but there isn't enough of it to cover the entire country, so they take desperate measures to gather in all the wheat - ripe or unripe - and avoid losing the harvest," he said.

**Location:** Central Asia  
Uzbekistan  
Turkmenistan  
Tajikistan

**Focus:** Central Asia

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