

## Georgian farms produce more because of reforms



**Tbilisi, USSR** -- About 10 miles east of Georgia's capital city lies the most productive collective farm in the republic.

Nestled in a valley near the Caucasus Mountains, the 2,200-acre nursery is lush with sapling fruit trees, which will be sent to farms where the soil cannot support the young trees.

Modern irrigation pipes, covered with a rust-free alloy that looks like zinc, carry water uphill through a series of small wooden gates, to a field where women are planting carrots by hand.

The women are dark-skinned Azerbaijanis, representing one of nine nationalities that live and work together on the farm. They move quickly in rows through the fields, chatting among themselves and laughing.

Grape vines weave in and out of fences along the dirt roads to the fields, waiting to be made into the sweet wines that have made Georgia famous.

This is the republic's lifeblood, the resources that make it so valuable to the Soviet Union.

One of the most productive farming areas of the Soviet Union, Georgia is considered the breadbasket, one of the few

republics with a climate mild enough to produce staples like vegetables and citrus fruits.

The temperature ranges from 60 to 80 degrees nine months out of the year, allowing for a long growing season. Rainfall is consistent, and has not varied for the last six years.

Georgian politicians, striving for secession from the Soviet Union, assert that the republic's strong agricultural base would allow Georgia to maintain an economic system separate from the Soviet Union.

But until two years ago, Georgian farms were almost as unproductive as those in harsher climates. Now, they produce three times the amount they did then -- mostly because of reforms implemented by President Mikhail Gorbachev.

Novrus Babayev, consultative director of the Georgian sovkhoz, or state-owned farm, said Gorbachev's five-year plan to restructure collective farms has produced drastic changes in the amount of food produced.

Two years ago, before the plan was in effect, Babayev's farm produced barely enough food to meet the government's production goals. What little was left fed the 300 workers who live on the farm.

The farm has progressed from one of the most unproductive in

Georgia to the most productive.

Babayev said this is because more decisions are made by the farmers themselves, as part of Gorbachev's plan to loosen government control.

Three years ago, Babayev's farm had 56 administrators, most of whom were chosen by Soviet party officials in Tbilisi. Now the farm has 15 administrators, 14 of whom were elected by farm workers. Babayev was chosen by party officials as the farm's liaison to the government.

Those living on the farm decide what they will grow and how they will plot their fields. Before, the government set standards on how much could be planted and when, Babayev said. This change, he said, has accounted for the increased production rates.

Now, people who work the land and know the best farming methods are the ones who make the decisions, he said. This has ended friction between the farmers and administrators, he said.

Because the farm is producing more, Babayev said, the workers are earning more. Two years ago, he said, farmers made 100 to 150 rubles a month, roughly \$160 to \$210 in U.S. currency.

Under Gorbachev's new plan, workers get paid for how much

they produce. This year, farmers on Babayev's sovkhoz make 450 to 500 rubles a month, or \$750 to \$830.

One-third of the crop goes to the government, Babayev said. After that one-third is turned in, the producer can sell the rest of the crop directly to consumers, or in the case of Babayev's farm, directly to other farms.

Farmers also can sell food grown on small plots behind their homes. Two to 3 percent of their earnings from extra crops is paid to the government in taxes, Babayev said. Workers on the sovkhoz planned to build a stand in downtown Tbilisi this summer to market their fruits and vegetables.

The reforms for collective farms also give people the chance to contract land separate from the farm. But Babayev said his workers are not ready for that step, so few people have tried to contract their own land.

Under this plan, Babayev said, a few people would grow one or two crops, and buy their own equipment. Because the government-owned equipment is expensive, Babayev said, it takes several years for a collective farm to purchase one tractor. For a farmer working independent of the sovkhoz, the purchase would take 10 years, he said.

If "private" workers cannot

afford to buy the equipment, they must wait until equipment is available from the nearest sovkhoz to harvest their crops, he said. If the sovkhoz has not finished harvesting, Babayev said, the farmers must let their crops sit in the field.

Also, Babayev said, farmers in the Soviet Union are so accustomed to working collectively, with many people planting and harvesting one field, that it is difficult for them to work alone. The contract plan is risky for that reason, he said, because if there is not enough time to meet production goals, farmers won't get paid.

Babayev said that while the lease-agreement plan is too advanced for the workers on his farm, most of Gorbachev's reforms have improved their lives, and made their work easier.

But farmers need equipment more than they need reforms, Babayev said. Georgian farmers know how to improve their farms, he said, but cannot get better equipment through the Soviet government.

Without the tools and technology to improve farming techniques, he said, Soviet collective farms will never produce enough food to feed the country.

-- Amy Edwards



Two women working on a government farm near Tbilisi. Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms have helped some Georgian farms become more profitable in recent years.

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