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Farm Subsidies, Mine Safety Top Topics at Cabinet Meeting

By Irina Filatova

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Prime Minister Vladimir Putin attacked the Agriculture Ministry on Thursday for delays in transferring 25.9 billion rubles ($917 million) in state subsidies to farmers ahead of the spring sowing season.

Only half of the funds, which are part of a 104 billion ruble state program to support the agriculture industry, have reached the farmers, Putin said at the Presidium meeting.

"Farmers got only half of this sum — 12.4 billion rubles. What's the matter? ... Tell me in normal human language," he said, addressing Agriculture Minister Yelena Skrynnik.

Skrynnik said that a number of regions, including Dagestan and the Kemerovo region, had failed to transfer the funds in full because of a "low level of financial planning and a poor regulatory system."

They also failed to provide additional funds to farmers from regional budgets, she said.

"Listen, it's the middle of April. ... The last two years were very difficult for the agriculture industry, and we must mobilize all financial and administrative resources to guarantee the harvest this year. I'm surprised at such an attitude!" Putin said.

Russia saw its grain crop fall to 60.9 million tons in 2010 from 97 million tons in 2009 as a result of the severe draught last summer.

Skrynnik said the delays in providing financing to farmers wouldn't affect this year's harvest, which is expected at 85 million tons to 90 million tons.

"We're taking measures for the harvest not to be damaged," she told reporters after the Presidium meeting.

She said her ministry was solving the problem with the governors who had failed to push through the funds in a timely manner.

Putin ordered Skrynnik and First Deputy Prime Minister Viktor Zubkov, who oversees the agriculture industry, to report on the situation in each region next week.

The Presidium also considered a new program to develop the coal mining industry through 2030, which aims to stimulate investment in modernization of mining equipment to increase miners' safety, among other measures.

"The program is rather ambitious and aimed at the innovative development of the mining industry," Energy Minister Sergei Shmatko said, adding that as a result injury rates at the mines were expected to fall by 90 percent by 2030.

A total of 135 miners died on the job in 22 accidents last year, mostly in the Raspadskaya disaster in May — a shock that triggered nationwide tightening of the industry's safety rules.

The document also stipulates the development of the railway infrastructure to increase coal exports, Shmatko said.

The program, whose first stage will start this year, is expected to result in an increase in the annual volume of coal produced to 430 million tons from 323 million tons last year, according to the government's web site.

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