

Agricultural Exports Hit All-Time High

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Farming exports reached an all-time high in value last year, Agriculture Minister Nikolai Fyodorov said Thursday.

Russia shipped \$16.6 billion worth of mostly grain, but also corn and vegetable oil, among other products, Fyodorov said at a regular Cabinet meeting.

His speech summed up a five-year government program to develop agriculture, which ended last year.

"Thanks to the government program, Russia is again emerging as a leading global food exporter," Fyodorov said. "It was never like this in the history of agrarian Russia during the Soviet period."

Russia depended heavily on grain imports during the Soviet era and years after the Soviet Union's breakup.

The country's export number is dwarfed by the \$141.3 billion worth of U.S. agricultural sales to foreign markets last year.

Fyodorov said vegetable oil, corn, rice and poultry exports were record breaking.

The Cabinet met as President Vladimir Putin dominated the day's news by holding his live call-in show. He sounded generally supportive of the Cabinet in answering some questions.

It's not the first time when ministers missed a chance to tune in for a major public appearance by the head of state. A Cabinet meeting was also underway during Putin's wide-ranging hours-long news conference Dec. 20.

Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev looked relaxed and allowed himself several jovial comments during Fyodorov's speech.

Fyodorov made a reference to the Bible when he explained why most of the farming program's objectives remained unattained.

The government put together the plan in 2007, the last full year of an economic boom fed by overflowing revenues from oil exports. Therefore, the goals it set were overly optimistic, he said.

"However, as the Scripture goes, fat years were followed by lean years," Fyodorov said. "And they came faster and for a longer time at that."

Hearing this, Medvedev interjected.

"It looks like you are all in cahoots," he said. "The finance minister has been going on with quotes about fat and lean years all along, and now you are at it."

Fyodorov said that only the meat production target had been met. He didn't say what the others were.

He went on to report that food security — reliance on domestically produced food — had increased as well. Russia produced 99 percent of grain it consumed last year, 96 percent of sugar, 75 percent of meat and 80 percent of milk and dairy products.

The federal and regional governments allocated a total of 730 billion rubles (\$23.5 billion) to the farming sector over the five years that the program ran, which was 18 percent more than originally planned, Fyodorov said.

Encouraged by the state support, private investment has further buoyed the sector, he said.

Medvedev concluded that the program was one of the most successful government efforts since the Soviet collapse.

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