

A Ministry of Agriculture Perspective on the Farmer Information and Advisory Service in the Russian Agricultural and Food Sector

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Abstract

This project utilized a network of 300 agricultural specialists, a network of rural radio stations, and an Internet backbone agricultural information archive to develop an innovative new agricultural and rural development communication system for Russia. Experts were encouraged to share their research findings and field recommendations with the project, and in return they received a quarterly packet that included similar recommendations from the other experts. Rural radio stations were given raw scripts or taped program materials via CDs or Internet links for local broadcasting, and in return were asked to send the project copies of local scripts they developed and broadcast. The overall project was coordinated by Moscow State University, but also collaborated with and shared radio script information with the Press Video Center of the Ministry of Agriculture. By the project's fifth year, the Internet site was receiving more than 1 million site visits per month. One innovative aspect of the project was a feedback form placed into each quarterly packet. Responses were received from 30 percent of recipients. Project staff found that recipients were willing to fill out very detailed feedback forms if they perceived that this would influence future materials they would receive.

[Note from Eric Abbott: Prior to 1990, Russian agriculture consisted of 25,000 state and collective farms (commonly 10,000 to 20,000 acres in size) that produced almost all of the grain and much of the dairy and meat for the country. Many vegetables and fruits were produced on small garden-type plots of land to which workers had long-term access. The highly centralized government communications consisted mainly of "directives" designed to ensure uniform production. Following 1990, state and collective farms were largely reorganized into joint stock companies, and managers had more choice about what to produce; they also faced a market economy for the first time. In addition, 277,000 new private independent farms of less than 200 acres were created. Both the reorganized farms and the new farms faced a very uncertain situation, which resulted in a high demand for information about market price and crops and livestock that might be profitable. To address the new situation, the Russian government and the World Bank launched the five-year \$240 million Agricultural Reform Implementation Support (ARIS) Project in 1995 designed to create a market-based price information system, a new extension system, and a new agricultural information system. The new system became known as the Farmer Information and Advisory Service, and it was implemented by the Ministry of Agriculture (World Bank Appraisal Report, 1994). This article provides a view of Russia's Farmer Information and Advisory Service from the point of view of the federal Ministry of Agriculture. At the end of this article are two other views, one by A. Tsydendambayev about private sector agricultural communication and extension activities, and a brief regional case study by Irina Victorovna Legostaeva.]

Introduction

Russia's transition to a market economy has necessitated creation of a new institutional infrastructure (Cochrane, Bjornlund, Haley, Hoskin, and Liefert, 1998; Reed, 1996; Kwiecinski, 1998), including a Farmer Information and Advisory Service whose main function is to supply agricultural producers with information that enables them to make sound business decisions and facilitates sustainable development in a market environment. It is important to note that agricultural producers' information needs have expanded and changed following the evolution of Russia's agricultural and food market. As the market developed and, correspondingly, competition strengthened, producers tended to request more information on the latest agricultural research findings and advanced farming practices, as well as information on marketing, business-planning and taxation (Veselovsky and Andreeva, 1999).

Sixty-five Regions Served

Beginning in 1996, as part of the ARIS World Bank Project, regional Farmer Information and Advisory Services began to be established that provided market information, research-based production recommendations, and assistance in legal and business restructuring of farm enterprises. Progress in the early years has been documented in other reports (Bautin, 1999, 2000; Veselovsky and Kolotov, 1999, 2000; Kalinin, 1999). By 2001, Farmer Information and Advisory Services were set up in 65 regions. Since regional agricultural authorities had differing opinions concerning the mission, objectives and approaches of this new service, the result was a diversity of institutional structures and approaches (Abbott and Ukhanova, 2000). The services were most frequently set up as structural divisions within departments of agriculture and food (23 regions), free-standing government enterprises and state institutions (16 regions), nonprofit entities (12 regions), divisions within agricultural retraining institutions (12 regions), and within research and educational institutions (5 regions). As of 2001, 1,200 advisers were employed at all levels of the system. In 2001, regional and local advisory services provided approximately 284,000 consultations on various aspects of agricultural production. Over time, the number of inquiries has increased. More than 15,000 agricultural specialists participated at workshops arranged by information and advisory services.

In addition to the advisory staff of departments of agriculture and food, agricultural researchers and trainers also were heavily involved in providing information and recommendations.

The largest number of consultations were provided in crop production (20%), livestock production (14%), farm accounting (14%), farm business management (10%), farm mechanization (9.5%), and legal issues (9%). Nearly half of the consultations delivered by the service related to technological topics. This trend is likely to continue in the future. Because of the dramatic change from a centralized quota production system to one based upon market and profit, the farmer information and advisory services also have paid special attention to such priority areas as training of anticrisis managers, financial revitalization of insolvent large-scale farms, restructuring of farm enterprises, marketing, farm management, business-planning, i.e., issues closely related to market reforms and adjustment (Runov, 1998). It is interesting to note that agricultural producers with experience operating in a market environment demonstrate a strong interest in research and development, since innovations will enable them to achieve a higher technological and business level of farm production.

Information-Seeking by Producers

The largest single category of clients of the advisory service is small-scale fruit-growers and gardeners (this category accounts for 44% of the total number of consultations provided by the regional advisory services). The next largest group is large-scale farms (30%), despite the fact that those farms have a large number of subject-matter specialists who often are highly professional and have adequate knowledge and skills. This provides good evidence that the advisory services are needed for all agricultural producers, without exceptions. Private family farmers (9%), holders of private household plots (5%) and staff of agricultural authorities (6%) represent a substantially smaller category of users. Researchers, educational staff and businessmen quite rarely ask for advice from the Farmer Information and Advisory Service.

An analysis of scope and type of consultations delivered by various entities of the Farmer Information and Advisory Service demonstrates that most services are provided by staff of local level information and advisory services (47% of the total number of consultations provided by all types of entities); the share of regional information and advisory services is 19%, while agricultural authorities have 28% and educational institutions have 3%.

In 2001 the farmer Information and Advisory Services provided assistance in implementation of more than 8,200 innovative projects, application of 31 industrial technologies, and reorganization of 265 large-scale farms.

Professional Development

The services place special emphasis on promotion and information dissemination activities. In particular, they arranged 1,863 workshops, 177 exhibitions, and 657 field days. They published more than 106,000 copies of information materials, including 2,602 bulletins.

In those regions where the advisory services have succeeded in expanding their activities, they now are regarded as a reliable channel for promotion and practical application of innovations, and they seriously influence acceleration of scientific and technical process in the sector. Agricultural producers, agricultural authorities and other entities demonstrate a growing interest in the advisory service.

Successful Initiatives

There are numerous examples of efficient performance of regional and local information and advisory services. Advisers of Kirov, Rostov, Penza, and Buryatia services have designed approaches for financial revitalization and reorganization of insolvent large-scale farms, and they have been carrying out activities dealing with land and property assessment, analysis of marketing of agricultural products and preparation of all required documents for official registration of newly created enterprises. New farm owners have been provided with consultations on regulation of property and land relations.

Outstanding progress has been achieved by the advisory service in Nizhny Novgorod region. The consultants of this service focus their efforts on promotion and application of soil conservation and environmentally friendly practices, improvement of fodder production, optimization of livestock feed rationing, dissemination of new advanced varieties of agricultural crops, creation of demonstration farms and field trials, and delivery of field workshops.

The information and advisory service in Volgograd Oblast has reached a mature development level. The service staff have designed business plans that attracted investment in the regional agriculture sector in 2000 for the amount of RUB 24 million (\$800,000), and in 2001–RUB 51.5 million (\$1.8 million).

A local information and advisory center in Sergiev-Posad (Moscow Oblast) provides high-level technological consultations to private family farmers. The center has achieved sound results in arranging field days and in issuing specialized information leaflets in order to disseminate advanced technologies and practices in crop production.

Advisory Service Problems

At the same time there are a number of bottlenecks that hamper efficient operation of the advisory service and factors that do not allow it to fulfill its functions as a key institutional component in the market economy. For instance, the information and advisory services at all levels have not been placing enough efforts in searching, testing and application of innovative technologies, and dissemination of advanced experiences. The majority of regional services have not yet introduced efficient monitoring procedures and sound feedback mechanisms. Therefore, agricultural producers actually are not able to influence agricultural research priorities. This, in turn, has resulted in a situation in which many research findings and technological developments cannot be converted to recommendations adapted to farmers needs. Often, recommendations are too complicated to be understood by farmers and, consequently, those research findings are not used to increase agricultural production.

Systematization and integration of completed research findings and developments is still an important problem that prevents increases in efficiency in the agricultural and food sector. No unbiased evaluation has been carried out to assess the impact of international projects (World Bank Agriculture Reform Implementation Support (ARIS) Project and European Union TACIS), in particular for those components that relate to the establishment of an information and advisory service. No recommendations have been developed concerning further use of their outputs in order to improve performance of the advisory service.

At the federal level, inadequate efforts have been undertaken to develop, to compile and to update information resources, especially in innovative technologies, business-planning, food market opportunities, foreign experience, etc. Capabilities of information systems are not fully used. A federal information portal via the Internet has not been created; therefore, federal and regional information resources of agricultural advisory services have not been properly integrated. This does not allow implementation of a sound scientific and technical policy aimed at introducing information and communication technologies in the agriculture and food sector, connecting agricultural producers to the information network and, subsequently, creation of a common information space. The federal budget funds have not been allocated as required.

Other serious constraints are the inadequate number of professional advisers at regional advisory services, the lack of a well-established vertical management structure, and the lack of an appropriate legal and regulatory framework (Kozlov, 2000).

Professional Development

No consistent efforts have been made to identify alternative income-generating activities, and that, combined with inadequate budget appropriations, restrains improvement of the material and technical basis of the information and advisory service and involvement of high-level professionals, that ultimately influence the overall performance of the advisory service.

If those issues are not addressed urgently, the information and advisory service will not be able to meet current challenges and will not be able to achieve a performance level approaching that of other leading agricultural countries.

About the Author

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