

Government Figures Vary on Grain Status

By [The Moscow Times](#)

October 03, 2010

The  **Moscow Times**

The Cabinet is planning to wait at least until July to raise the issue of allowing grain exports, First Deputy Prime Minister Viktor Zubkov said Friday.

The statement is the latest confirmation from the Cabinet that it disagrees with President Dmitry Medvedev's statement about the possibility to consider lifting the current export ban after Russia collects this year's harvest.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin initially imposed the ban from Aug. 15 to Dec. 31 and said later that it would be extended beyond that period until after Russia completes collecting its next harvest.

Zubkov publicly sparred with Agriculture Minister Yelena Skrynnik over grain reserves in a dispute that took place in Putin's presence.

Skrynnik said the reserves stood at 26.3 million metric tons of grain, prompting Zubkov to drop a critical remark.

“This needs a better look,” Zubkov said. “Statistics show 21.4 [million] tons.”

Skrynnik defended her figure.

“Well, no, Vladimir Vladimirovich. Well, I am sorry, we always argue,” she said, addressing Putin, and laughed.

The two government officials also disagreed — out of Putin's sight — about the incoming grain harvest, with Zubkov saying it would end up being 60 million tons. Russia already gathered 59 million tons, he said.

Skrynnik said elsewhere that Russia had already collected 60.1 million tons of grain and would have more because harvesting continued.

“The figure is not final,” she said of Zubkov's forecast.

Whatever the harvest, both Zubkov and Skrynnik said it would be enough to last Russia till the next one.

The potential for Russia's wheat crop in 2011 is worse than traders may think because late planting has shortened the growing season before the onset of winter, agricultural forecaster Martell Crop Projections said late Thursday.

Wheat in the Volga Federal District's Saratov region should have been planted by Sept. 1 to give the grain enough time to develop hardiness against winter cold, said agricultural meteorologist Gail Martell, who heads the forecasting company. Ongoing drought delayed sowing and germination, she said.

Russian winter-crop planting has been delayed because of this summer's drought. Winter grains were planted on 9.95 million hectares as of Sept. 29, down 24 percent from a year ago, Moscow-based researcher SovEcon said Friday.

“Central Russia wheat has no chance of making a normal crop, because of a month-long delay in planting that cuts the fall growing season short,” Martell said. “Perhaps 50 percent of Russian winter wheat is in jeopardy from severe planting delays in the lower Volga district” as well as the Volgograd and Rostov areas, the forecaster said.

Russia's “new-crop wheat potential is worse than perceived by traders,” she said.

Rain showers developing this week in the Saratov region will improve germination and growth, Martell said. The forecast is for cool and rainy weather in the next seven days, meaning that the heat needed to drive crop development is lacking, she said.

“If coolness persists in October, dormancy may come on very quickly,” Martell said. “In that case, wheat would have insufficient time for hardening, the process that builds up immunity to winter cold.”

(MT, Bloomberg)

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