



DOING WELL BY DOING GOOD

A Russian producer's mission to improve the health of his soil, increase yield and **share knowledge with others** offers all the more proof that farmers, no matter where they live, have a lot in common. **BY DES KELLER**

ON RUSSIA'S ARID EURASIAN STEPPE, RAIL FAKHRISLAMOV works to bring the latest in agricultural practices and technology to the 44,000-acre farm he manages. Thanks in large part to the efforts of the unassuming "Mr. Rail," as he's known by many of his non-Russian-speaking associates, what was once a state-owned, Soviet-era operation facing a variety of challenges has become a sort of showplace for what agriculture is becoming in Russia's grain belt.

Fakhrislamov is an agronomist by trade who had worked on farms during the 1980s before going into private business following the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 2000, he was hired to oversee the struggling Krasnaya Bashkiria, or KB, farm, located just east of the Ural Mountains, in the Russian Republic of Bashkortostan.

Like so many farmers across the planet, Fakhrislamov has had his challenges. Topographically, KB is similar to arid, flat, eastern Colorado and western Kansas—except without the irrigation. Given a variety of pressures, including price, he sought a different mix of crops and began growing less wheat, rye and barley. These days, he primarily grows sunflowers, flax and canola, while a smaller percentage of the farm's acreage is planted to corn for silage for the farm's dairy, along with various grasses and alfalfa.

A tireless innovator, he also realized that intensive conventional tillage was not helping keep the farm's soil intact or hold moisture. By 2010, Fakhrislamov had moved much of KB's cropping operation over to no-till. Still, there were problems. The lack of tillage meant the soils struggled to warm up soon enough during what was already a short growing season; the KB farm is located at about 53 degrees north, a latitude similar to that of Edmonton, Alberta.

Finding Expert Resources

Though Fakhrislamov regularly works with his local university, the farm's move to no-till was unprecedented for the region. So, any new farm practices of this sort would have been beyond most local expertise. While looking for that additional know-how, Fakhrislamov formed a close working relationship with, among others, AGCO® officials Ildar Uralov, the area sales manager based in Ufa, and Cameron McKenzie, marketing manager for seeding and tillage, Europe. Uralov and McKenzie facilitated visits for Fakhrislamov, as well as other Russian farmers, to operations in the United States, Canada and elsewhere, allowing best practices and challenges to be shared and discussed.

It was during those trips Fakhrislamov saw how strip tillage—particularly in the United States—helps prevent soil erosion by keeping residue in the field, while allowing for a narrow band to be tilled for seeding. By pushing residue aside from a narrow seeding row, strip-till lets the exposed soil warm a bit quicker in the spring. This allows Fakhrislamov to plant earlier, which is important in a short 100-day growing season.

Strip-till also helps preserve limited moisture, which is critical at the KB farm, where, without irrigation and with only 12 inches of precipitation annually, the operation depends heavily on snowmelt from the Ural >>

As have producers elsewhere, many Russian farmers have found that strip-till can increase yield by conserving moisture, while allowing the seedbed to warm up earlier than fields where no-till is employed.

RUSSIA BY THE NUMBERS

130.7 MILLION

Russia's estimated total grain production (in metric tons) in 2017—a new record. Investment in seed technology, greater fertilizer use and better management practices since 2000 have improved productivity. By comparison, the 2017 U.S. grain crop is projected at 436.4 million metric tons, and the Canadian grain crop is projected at 83.8 million metric tons.

33 MILLION METRIC TONS

Russian wheat exports for the 2017–2018 season, which will be the world's largest, USDA says. The U.S. and Canada will export 26.5 and 21 million metric tons, respectively.

71.4%

Amount of Russian grain production in 2016 for which corporate farms accounted. Individual entrepreneurs accounted for 27.7%.

81.9

Corn bushels per acre in 2016 in Russia, up from 42.1 in 2002. U.S. corn yields average 174.6. With new technologies, yields are expected to increase, especially in Russia.

Mountains to the west. "Strip-till saves more moisture," says Fakhrislamov, speaking through an interpreter. "Strip-till can catch 40% of melted snow. Before, 80% of the melted snow flowed away from the fields."

Sharing What He Has Learned

Over the past seven years, as Fakhrislamov has moved the farm from conventional tillage to no-till, to increasing amounts of strip tillage, the farm's profitability has risen 30%. The efforts have been so profound that, last year, AGCO helped conduct an event to share best practices on the farm, with plans to possibly sponsor several more in the country in the future.

"People from all over Russia are coming to his farm to learn about ag," says Darren Goebel, director of global commercial crop care at AGCO. "This is about Mr. Rail wanting to do better by the farm and the people who depend on it. He worked on the farm during the Soviet era and is now leading the effort to [improve operations] in a very dryland-type environment, where, in the past, heavy tillage helped contribute to poor crop performance."

"What I like about him is that he's not frightened to try something new," adds AGCO's McKenzie. "In the U.S., you have so many ways to get information. You have local Extension services and universities. You haven't got the same dissemination in Russia. Fakhrislamov is a pioneer, and people listen to him." In many productive areas of the continent, such as Ukraine, Russia, Hungary and Romania, large and technically more sophisticated North American-style farm machinery is a great fit, according to Goebel. "Yet only 25 to 30% of the implements used [in these former Eastern Bloc countries] fit that category. So, showing their farmers how that equipment can improve crop productivity, increase efficiency and ultimately lead to higher profitability presents a win-win situation."

"We, at AGCO, are focusing on what's important to the farmer; because if we can help make them successful, we will be, too. We want to help growers solve agronomic problems and prove the return on investment of our solutions in the field. In the end, we are all in this together—feeding a hungry world."



People come from all over Russia to learn from "Mr. Rail."

Russian Crop Tour

The confluence of Fakhrislamov's innovation and AGCO's introduction of new equipment and technologies provided the opportunity to showcase both during the Crop Tour held on the KB

farm Aug. 15, 2017. The event, which showed the use of strip-till and no-till, also demonstrated the yield-increasing effects of equipment, such as the White Planters 9800VE Series planter and associated Precision Planting® components.

Fertilizer banded with strip-till, or applied with the planter at different rates, also was studied, and growers had the chance to review different hybrids and varieties for both corn and sunflower offered by Syngenta. Overall, the Russian Crop Tour was similar to events AGCO held in the United States last year and in 2016.

Nearly 300 farmers attended the Crop Tour at the KB farm. Four AGCO dealers brought their customers, while one dealer, Matrix Universal, sponsored the event. Scientists and agronomists from the United States, Denmark, the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Bashkortostan and the Bashkir State Agrarian University took part.

Fakhrislamov was extremely pleased with the event, saying that it will prove beneficial "for years to come." And there may be more events in the near future. AGCO, along with its partner, AGCO-RM, plans to conduct one Crop Tour event in 2018, and will expand agronomic testing and consulting on the KB farm.

Part of Fakhrislamov's credibility arises out of what he's been able to do in a region where farming is difficult and margins are slim. "His farm," says Goebel, "is located in a very challenging region, where the cards are stacked against you. There's inadequate moisture, a short growing season and soils that need help to recover. Still, through innovation and technology, KB farm, with the help of Rail and a strong leadership team he's put in place, is doing well."

This Crop Tour event, like those in the United States, gives farmers a chance to see the agronomic benefits of the plant-machine-soil interaction, according to Goebel. "Crop Tour is a very important platform for exchanging experiences. It gives farmers around the world a chance to evaluate different technologies under actual field conditions and, most importantly, the results of their implementation," he says.

"We're finding more and more farmers, no matter where they are, who say, 'There must be a better way, and I will go to the ends of the earth to find it, because I want my farm and the people that rely on it to be successful.' That's the mission Mr. Rail has been on, and we've been privileged to work with him." **FL**

■ For more about AGCO Crop Tour, see myFarmLife.com/croptour.

58%

USDA estimates that by 2025, Russian corn production will increase by 58% over levels from 2011-2014, as land planted to corn will reach 3.1 million hectares (7.66 million acres). By contrast, Russian wheat will occupy 30.1 million (74.38 million acres) hectares by 2025.

2.32 MILLION

Number of irrigated acres of Russian farmland, according to Russia's 2006 agricultural census (most recent data available). In the United States, 55.3 million acres of farmland are irrigated. In Canada, 1.7 million acres receive irrigation.

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