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## International Perspective Farm Business Management in Kazakhstan

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### Livestock Production in Kazakhstan

If you're over 50 years old and live in Kazakhstan, chances are that you long for the good old days of the Soviet Union and state-run agriculture. While life may have been Spartan by western standards, it was predictable. Everyone had a home, medical care, basic education and a few extra dollars for vodka and shashlik on the weekends.

Prior to 1990, Kazakhstan was a regular exporter of grain and a steady supplier of meat, milk and eggs to neighboring Soviet republics. The Soviet State Farm system was highly integrated with grains, fruits, vegetables, forage and livestock - primarily beef, dairy, pork and poultry. Most farms had at least one irrigation system, usually large reservoirs supplied by deep wells that served anywhere from 50 to 1,000 acres of specialized production, such as potatoes, cabbage, cucumber and other staples.

The goal for each state farm was first, to be self-sufficient and second, to be an exporter. Something similar in Canada would be the highly integrated, labour-intensive Hutterite and Amish communities with several intensive livestock operations along with cereals, oilseeds, pulses, fruits, vegetables and value-added food processing. This provided a job and a guaranteed basic standard of living.

After independence in 1991, Kazakhstan experienced a severe "transitional recession" with the withdrawal of Soviet support. The entire rural and agricultural system fell into complete disarray. Skeletons of large intensive livestock complexes still dot the landscape like abandoned prairie farm-yards.



**Photo:** Abandoned livestock barns that dot the country every 10-15 kms.

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All that is left of a vibrant livestock sector is backyard operations where almost all production is at best a cottage industry serving only the local market.



**Photo:** A backyard pen for 1-3 head of cattle, a few sheep and a dozen chickens

Since 2000, the general economy has recovered with the natural resource sectors booming – particularly oil and gas exports, but also uranium, chromium and aluminum manufacturing. In 2010, Kazakhstan surpassed Canada as the largest processor and exporter of uranium.

Some of the resource revenues have been used to stimulate the agricultural sector. This has been focused on the grains industry – developing a mono-culture system far different from the past.

Kazakhstan has enormous feed grains capacity – but, being land-locked, exporting raw grains becomes a logistical and economic challenge. The real potential is in the integrated livestock economy of the past which was abruptly put to an end by the declining Soviet empire.

The Food and Agricultural Organization predicts meat and dairy production must double by 2040 to meet the demands of a 9 billion people. A good deal of that demand is in China, which borders eastern Kazakhstan.



**Photo:** Household milk cows grouped together for daily grazing managed by a cowboy



**Photo:** Collecting the family cow at the end of the day – home for milking

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The current strategy of rebuilding the agricultural sector based on a mono-culture grains industry seems narrow when Kazakhstan has competitive advantages on which to rebuild a strong livestock sector. The skill-sets of both younger and older farmers need to be combined because the challenge for the country is to find the right blend of success from the past and new innovation for the future.

**More next week ...**

*Al Scholz is working as a research agronomist on a 5,200 ha [12,300 acre] demonstration farm in Northern Kazakhstan from May to October 2010. See his Blog for more information at [www.awellfedworld.com/blog](http://www.awellfedworld.com/blog).*