

Soviet Scientist-Agricultural Engineer Impressed By U.S. Farm Systems



From left, Amos Beller, farmer; Bill O'Brien, Farm Credit; Carol Mercner, Farm Credit; and Oleg Marchenko, Soviet scientist; take a look at the Beller's Brother poultry operation.

LOU ANN GOOD

Lancaster Farming Staff
LEOLA (Lancaster Co.) — For three months a Soviet scientist-agricultural engineer has been taking an in-depth look at American-style farming.

After visits to 25 states, Oleg Marchenko told Lancaster County farmers, Melvin and Amos Beiler, that he is impressed with cooperatives.

"You have cooperatives for seeds, fertilizers, milk, and Farm Credit," Marchenko said. "In my country, I would like to see similar cooperatives established for production, storage, and processing of crops."

Marchenko told the Beiler Brothers, who operate a farm near Leola, "Americans have a flexible system. If a crop doesn't do well on your land, you can change to another one, but a collective farm in the Soviet Union needs to grow a fixed amount of crop every year even if the soil and climate is not suited for it."

Amos Beiler asked, "You mean, if I lived there, you would make me raise cows when I don't like them? I like pigs. I want to add more pigs."

"And you can do that, here," Marchenko said, "as long as you have a market. But in my country, you must understand, we do not

have the ideal conditions that you do. We have a big problem with transportation and distribution."

Collective farms average 40 to 60 percent vegetable loss annually. These losses are the result of problems faced in planting, harvesting, transporting, and storing the crops.

In theory, the collective farm sounds like a good idea — a group of farmers work together, and use the profits to improve the community. In contrast, an American farmer works to raise his individual standard of living, which is considered selfish by socialists.

But most collective farms in the Soviet Union are in poor financial shape. The reasons are legion.

Unlike the U.S., where farmers choose to raise crops that are most suitable to the soil and climate, and then ship them to markets, the collective farms are "multi-branched" farms, which means they must grow all the crops needed for the central village. It doesn't matter if the soil isn't conducive to cabbage. They must grow it because the village needs it since there is not a transportation network to ship food in and out of the areas.

Because the farms have only one tractor to every 400 acres, they cannot completely plant and harvest the crops during prime growing and harvesting times. It takes one tractor too long to cover

such a large area.

Then, there are tractor breakdowns with which to contend. "In the U.S., dealers have spare parts and you can fix your tractor in a hurry so that no time is lost," Marchenko said. "But, in my country, there are no dealerships for parts, and it is not always possible to get spare parts in time to finish the job."

The Soviets also have poor quality metal for agricultural use. "We use our tractors 10 years at best," Marchenko said.

"Farmers in the U.S. have several sizes tractors on their farms. But when you don't have enough tractors, you need to use a big tractor for a small job. It's inefficient. We spend about two times more fuel to get two to three times less product, and we use five to seven times more manhours for labor," Marchenko said.

"For example, we sent a million people to harvest potatoes at one farm. But they needed to travel three hours to get there and three hours to return home. Consider the cost of fuel. That raises the labor costs tremendously," he said.

The lack of processing plants in the area where crops are raised is also a large factor in the collective farm's loss of food. Added to this deficit, is the lack of technology. On a collective farm, a person



Oleg Marchenko, right, examines an ear of corn grown by Amos Beller, left.

might milk cows one day and the next day plant a crop. There is no follow-through.

"People don't understand the value of each job because they don't follow it through from beginning to end like American farmers do. It's impossible for them to be aware of all the stages of the crops because they don't know crop sequences, only the agronomists know that. Our people have been told what to do. We have lost the peasant who had the knowledge of agriculture," Marchenko said.

Although the Soviet government is willing to give individuals land to farm, Marchenko asks, "Who wants it? How will they care for it? How will they buy equipment, seed, and fertilizer?"

Despite the obstacles facing Soviet farmers, Marchenko is optimistic. "I see cooperatives as the answer," he said.

He would like to see joint ventures between his country and other countries. Of prime importance is establishing a food processing plant. His country would like to barter, trade or have what he refers to as a coupon exchange where a country is given a coupon to redeem in exchange for services.

"The markets are there," Carol Mercner of Keystone Farm Credit said. "Western countries could fill those needs, but they won't do it for nothing."

In 1988, Mercner spent one month in the Soviet Union with a delegation of ag engineers from the U.S. In 1990, she returned to visit with Marchenko's family for a month to find out how the average Soviet citizen lives. She ha

helped Marchenko establish contacts during his visit in the States. Mercner sees Soviet problems as complex. She believes that cooperatives in this country have the framework to help the Soviets, but they cannot do it without an exchange of money.

"The missing link is that the rouble is not convertible," she said. "We need to have an exchange of money because the Soviets do not have enough of what we want to make trading a viable option."

Marchenko hopes machinery companies will settle in his country so that they can provide the parts so desperately needed by farmers.

He wants to see programs such as 4-H established. "The children need to learn about improving stock through breeding and feeding," he said. In the past, children have not had opportunity to be a part of the large collective farms.

To make all these changes will take many years, longer than 10, Marchenko surmises. But he is not discouraged.

"Change will come slowly. Some do not want to change. They are afraid. They want the security of a collective farm. I believe we will have both for a transitional period — the collective farms for those who want it and privatization for those who want it. Economically competition will show which is the best for our specific rural conditions.

"I have traveled to 25 U.S. states and observed their farming practices. I am convinced that cooperatives and joint ventures hold the answers," Marchenko said.

Rediscover Backyard Composting

LANCASTER (Lancaster Co.) — Fall will soon be here and with this season comes leaves and other green material from the trees, shrubs, vegetable and flower gardens. One way to easily take care of this material is through composting. Composting is an age old art that has been "rediscovered" because of recent legislation limiting yard and garden waste into landfills. For many home gardeners, this will be the first fall that they cannot send the "garden trash" away. The various aspects and activities of composting will be presented through a lecture, slide and question and answer session. Participants will learn about:

- Soil Basics.
- The Food Web of Decomposition.
- Setting Up Easy Composting Systems for the Backyard.

Instructors include York Co. Master Gardeners. The class will be held Tuesday, Sept. 17, 7:30

p.m.-9 p.m. All courses are held at the Farm and Home Center, 1383 Arcadia Road, Lancaster in the classrooms downstairs. Cost is \$8 (includes composting manual and refreshments).

Remember, all classes are designed for the gardening public, informative to the novice or seasoned gardener.

To register, send a check made payable to Agricultural Extension, Penn State Cooperative Extension, c/o Home Horticultural Seminars, 1383 Arcadia Road, Room 1, Lancaster, PA 17601.

(At the present time, the downstairs meeting room of the Farm and Home Center is accessible only by stairs. If you use a wheelchair or crutches or are unable to use stairs and you want to attend a meeting scheduled for this room, please contact H. Bruce Hellerick at (717) 394-6851, at least five working days prior to the scheduled program to arrange for alternative meeting site.)



Soviet scientist-agricultural engineer Oleg Marchenko visited Lancaster County farms this week. From left: Bill O'Brien of Farm Credit, Melvin Beller, Lill Beller, Soviet Scientist Oleg Marchenko, and Amos Beller.