

Farmer to Farmer links shepherds in Kazakhstan with specialists in Maryland

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Farmers in Kazakhstan, a country in the former Soviet Union, have been raising sheep for hundreds of years.

The problem is that they're still using many of the methods employed when nomads traveled the area centuries ago, said Paul Tashner, president of TCO International, a Westminster-based enterprise helping Russian and American companies do business together.

"You still see a shepherd with a staff looking after a couple hundred sheep," said Mr. Tashner, who helped bring a Jeep Eagle dealership to Kazakhstan last year. "There are cowboys herding sheep on horses over the fields, which don't have fences.

"There's a lot of room for improvement."

So Mr. Tashner -- who said he wants to give something back to the developing areas he's doing business with -- has helped set up a Farmer to Farmer exchange program between the Kazakh residents and three Maryland sheep specialists.

Carroll County extension agent David Greene, Wicomico County extension agent Susan Schoenian and Eldon Gemmill of Westminster, a former West Virginia shepherd who currently works for the Baltimore County Department of the Environment, will leave for Kazakhstan on Oct. 22 and return Nov. 5.

They will teach two groups of 25 shepherds modern sheep management techniques, ways to improve wool and meat quality, and marketing techniques, Mr. Tashner said.

Farmer to Farmer is a program sponsored by the U.S. Agency for International Development and Winrock International, a private foundation based in Arkansas.

"Fifty percent of their livestock is sheep," Mr. Tashner said of Kazakhstan, noting that the country has about 35 million sheep compared with 17 million people.

"One of the things this business is committed to is social projects in the areas where we do business," he said. "I donate 15 to 20 percent of my time and energy to nonprofit activities that help improve the local communities."

The Farmer to Farmer project emerged out of talks with Peace Corps volunteers in Kazakhstan and further discussions with Mr. Gemmill, Mr. Tashner said. Mr. Gemmill then led him to Mr. Greene and Ms. Schoenian, he said.

"David is a renowned sheep expert, well-known throughout the U.S.," Mr. Tashner said.

Mr. Greene -- who raises the animals himself and is often asked to speak at various sheep-breeding association meetings -- is more modest about his abilities.

"I guess maybe I've traveled around enough and been in the sheep industry long enough that I can make a difference," he said. "I like the challenge. I wanted to take the opportunity to try to help out these people.

"When you believe in freedom, freedom of choice and the philosophy of competition, you have a desire to see these people succeed over there."

Although the two three-day seminars -- one in Dzhambul and the other in south Kazakhstan -- will cover modern veterinary care and management, Mr. Greene said he will spend a good bit of time discussing the financial aspects of shepherding in a capitalistic society.