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SUCCESS STORY
Farmer Navigates Tricky Watermelon Market

A watermelon farmer learn to leverage supply and demand

Photo: IRC/Yuliya Gureyeva

A wholesaler who had been importing watermelons inspects his order from a local farmer he found through USAID.

USAID connected a local farmer with a wholesaler who had been importing a special variety of watermelon. The deal created four full-time and four seasonal jobs, gave the farmer security, and boosted the farm's sales by nearly $9,000.

One of the biggest problems facing watermelon growers in rural Azerbaijan is predicting market demand. Every year farmers raise thousands of tons of watermelons. Most rely on wholesalers to buy their goods and transport them to the cities. Since most farmers plant their melons at the same time, they also harvest simultaneously, often leading to a surplus of watermelons and prices below actual production cost.

The Gunesh farm in Salyan, Azerbaijan has been growing watermelons for many years. The farm has a reputation for producing prize watermelons under strict agricultural and hygienic standards. The farm's owner always hesitated to cultivate his entire plot of land, since prices are so unpredictable. In 2004, for example, the farm produced 25 tons of the Global variety of watermelons, but was able to sell only 18 tons. The remainder rotted in the field.

The next year was different. The USAID-sponsored Salyan Marketing Center identified a buyer from Baku who guaranteed to buy 80 tons of Shaban variety watermelons. An early maturing variety, they are typically imported from Iran and are known for their large size, sweet red pulp, and attractive light green rind. The Marketing Center told the Gunesh farm about the buyer's needs and facilitated a contract between them.

This year, with USAID assistance procuring seeds and learning appropriate cultivation techniques, the farmer grew the Shaban variety for the first time. In order to fulfill the order, he devoted additional land to cultivation, which he had been unwilling to risk in the past. The contract provided the farmer with secure income and enabled him to dedicate his efforts to bringing a higher-value product to the market.

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