

DPRK PREPARING FOR SPRING FERTILIZER SHORTAGES

North Korea, facing chronic food deficiencies, is again looking at fertilizer shortages as the spring farming season approaches. North Korean authorities and farmers are particularly troubled by the fact that, just as last year, the likelihood of receiving chemical fertilizer aid from the South is practically non-existent.

A February 26th (North) Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) article titled “Korea’s Effort to Overcome the Food Problem” reported strenuous efforts were underway to “independently” overcome the lack fertilizer in order to ease food shortages throughout the nation. According to the KCNA, “While giving on-the-spot guidance at the Heungnam Fertilizer Complex, Comrade Kim Jong Il explained that in order to ease the food problems, much fertilizer needs to be sent to farming villages.” In addition, it was explained that organic fertilizer production needs to be stepped up in order to compensate for the lack of chemical fertilizer. The report added, “The People’s Army as well as enterprises, institutions, villages, and civic organizations across the country are sending farming utensils and compost to agricultural villages.”

According to Tae-Jin Kwon, leading researcher at the Korea Rural Economic Institute, North Korea drastically increased chemical fertilizer imports from China in order to prepare for the possibility of a continued hold on South Korean fertilizer aid, purchasing approximately 40 times more fertilizer at the end of last year and this January than it imported during the same period a year earlier. According to Chinese customs statistics, North Korea imported 25,608 tons of fertilizer between November 2008 and the end of January 2009. During the same period a year prior, North Korea imported a mere 635 tons. Kwon stated that the reason for this sharp increase in chemical fertilizer imports was a measure to stockpile necessary amounts of resources in preparation for the eventuality that South Korean fertilizer aid would not be forthcoming.

During this same period, North Korea imported 12,694 tons of Chinese grains, a notable drop from the 108,109 tons imported one year ago. Kwon argued that this was a reflection of North Korea’s advance import and stockpiling of grain in light of last year’s Chinese measures restricting the export of grain, and the fact that this spring, fertilizer is a more pressing need.

“If South Korean fertilizer aid to the North is not forthcoming this year, it will have a severe impact on the North’s grain production. This is already reflected in grain prices within North Korean markets, and could serve to drive them up even further.”

Over the last 10 years, more than 65 percent of the fertilizer used in North Korea has been provided by the South, with Seoul providing between 300 and 350 thousand tons each year. This is enough to boost North Korean grain production by 600 thousand tons annually. Kwon pointed out, “North Korea owes its increasing grain production since 2000 to South Korean fertilizer aid.”

He went on to add, “Even if the missile situation were resolved and an atmosphere conducive to dialog could be created within 6-Party Talks, the South Korean government would not be able to open dialog with North Korea until after April,” and, “If dialog were reestablished and aid transport were arranged, in order for fertilizer to be effective it would have to be sent to North Korea by May, at the latest.”