

Soy specialist's expertise takes her long, long way

UI ag economics grad teaches Tajiks to boost nutrition

By ANNE COOK
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URBANA - Megan Puzey's interest in soybeans has taken her far from the Fairmount fields where she grew up.

On World Food Day last Wednesday, Puzey talked about her recent trip to the Central Asian country of Tajikistan, where she helped bakers and housewives learn how to mix protein-rich soy flour in the bread that's a dietary staple there.

"Tajikistan was devastated by a civil war, and many children were left without parents," said Puzey, a 2001 University of Illinois agricultural economics graduate who now works as a research specialist for the UI's National Soybean Research Laboratory.

"We introduced soy-fortified wheat flour," she said. "World food programs are interested in using it because they're mandated to provide food security in the country. By adding 12 per cent soy flour, you increase the protein of their bread 40 percent."

In a country where bread and tea are dietary staples, that extra protein can make quite a difference, she said. That's true especially for institutionalized orphans who lost their parents in warfare or were abandoned by families that couldn't feed them.

Puzey grew up on her family's farm near Fairmount in western Vermilion County, and she admits that her father,

"Since I majored in International relations, I knew I'd go places, but not places like Tajikistan. I'm still arguing with people trying to convince them it's a country." Megan Puzey, 2001 University of Illinois agricultural economics graduate and now research specialist for the UI's National Soybean Research Laboratory

Alan, who has been active in commodity circles for years, was a big influence on her. Alan Puzey is chairman of the Council on Food and Agricultural Research (C-FAR), a consortium formed to expand the pool of agricultural research money in the state.

Megan Puzey majored in international relations and consumer economics.

"I knew I wanted to see what was out there," she said. "I studied in the Netherlands in college, and I was all over Europe, but I'd never been to Asia."

The soybean laboratory works closely with a 3-year-old program called World Initiative for Soy in Human Health (WISHH) to spread the word to food aid organizations about the value of including soy components in the food taken to Third World countries.

Jim Hershey, head of the program, said its secondary goal is to introduce small-scale soy-processing technologies to people who can use them locally to start commercial development.

"We're showing people how soy can be incorporated locally into the food they eat," said

Hershey, who has focused WISHH's initial work on countries in Africa.

Puzey said after Sept. 11, 2001, program attention turned to hungry people in Afghanistan.

"We knew they had a need for more protein," she said of the emerging plan to incorporate soy protein in the flat-bread people there eat daily.

Puzey, who returned from Dushanbe, Tajikistan, on Oct. 6, said that city was picked for field trials in the area because the United Nations' World Food Program has an office there.

"We spent the summer here working with Afghanistan's flatbread and the yeast-raised bread people eat in Tajikistan," she said. "Four of us learned about them by working with the product. I went to Tajikistan because I was willing to travel there."

UI graduate student Jack Cocks also traveled to the country. Agricultural economist Hamish Gow said Cocks, who is now studying and teaching in Armenia, met Puzey in Tajikistan to help teach there. He'll return to the UI in December, Gow said.

"He's working on a U.S. AID project at the agribusiness training center in Armenia, teaching entrepreneurship and general management," he said. "Jack's interested in working in developing countries."

Puzey said in Tajikistan, World Food Program personnel helped her make connections with school feeding programs.

"The children get noodle soup, two slices of bread and one small bun with sugar on top," she said. "At the first school, we added soy to the bun. At the second, we made noodles with wheat flour and soy."

She also visited a commercial bakery, one housewife who baked her family's bread in a tandoor oven, another who sold her bread at the local market, and with bakers who helped her make bread for an orphanage.

Puzey said she saw signs of wretched poverty

everywhere.

"At schools, they don't have enough money for benches, so the children eat standing up," she said. "The houses are small, made out of dirt and stone. There's a layer of dust on everything."

She said police were everywhere, and several tried to get her to give them money for photographs, but most of the time she felt safe.

"Things have improved in the capital since this president came to power," Puzey said.

She said the World Food Program wants to bring leaders from Tajikistan to the UI to earn skills to increase the nutrition of their food.

"We're still in the early stages of this work," Puzey said.

Meanwhile, she learned more soy skills last week while participating in a weeklong workshop teaching 11 representatives from six African countries how to use soy to improve their local diets

"I'm learning about different aspects of the soybean industry, but I enjoy working with food aid," Puzey said. "And the opportunities for soy are growing. The World Food Program isn't using it now. They hadn't heard of it, but now they have."

Gow said programs such as those in Armenia and Tajikistan expand students' knowledge, but they're also valuable because they increase the knowledge available in Illinois about countries far away.

"Whether we make money or not, we're getting our people over there to see what's going on, to understand the issues and to bring that knowledge back here," Gow said. "The question is, how do we take it to another level, to start selling soy and other things? I think the only way to do that is to spend money putting people on the ground so they can understand first hand how to do that."

Puzey said she never dreamed her work would take her to exotic destinations like Tajikistan.

"Since I majored in international relations, I knew I'd go places," Puzey said. "But not places like Tajikistan. I'm still arguing with people trying to convince them it's a country."



Megan Puzey holds some dehulled soybeans, which can be used to make soy milk, at the National Soybean Research Laboratory on the University of Illinois campus in Urbana last week. Puzey was participating in a weeklong workshop teaching 11 representatives from six African countries how to use soy to improve their local diets.

News-Gazette photo by Heather Coit