

Possible opponents may reproach us for our journalistic ardour and lack of restraint, but the development of the Yamal Peninsula is a serious, large-scale government project. The date on which the Yamal gas must be delivered to consumers has been set: 1991. Nechernozem'ya is the first area slated to receive this gas.

Besides, we are told again, we must be realistic: the development of the Yamal gas fields will enable the gas industry to achieve a rapid increase in the annual output, raising it to one trillion cubic metres of natural gas. A delay in reaching this volume could create a perceptible imbalance in the country's fuel and power supply.

These arguments, it must be admitted, are weighty. Nonetheless, we can't help recalling similar arguments 5-10 years ago when the Samotlor fields were developed at the same forced pace. There is a firm, widely-held conviction that the rapid development of the Samotlor fields was fully justified. By happy coincidence, its peak output occurred at the time of the highest oil prices on the world market. Samotlor provided a lot of hard currency and an abundance of foodstuffs for sale: the shops in the capital were filled with a broad range of food which is no longer available, and the shelves were stocked with a wealth of imported consumer goods. Although we knew that domestic productions of consumer goods was less than could be desired, we still held fast to the illusion that we lived as well as others.

The opinion of experts was recently supported in the press by Dr. A. Arbatov, a Moscow economist: "If it hadn't been for the Samotlor oil, we would have had to begin perestroika 10-15 years ago."