



U.S. EMBASSY - BAGHDAD

2008 Provincial Reconstruction Team News

-Iraqi Agriculture Officials Visit U.S. Farms-

By Gene Arnold
Special Correspondent

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Diyala Province, Iraq - Several agricultural officials from this rural province learned new production techniques while engaging with American farmers and their families on a recent trip to the United States arranged by the Diyala Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT).

Instead of hotels, they stayed in the homes of average American farmers and saw family life at first hand. The Iraqi guests repeatedly commented on how hard American farmers worked despite their access to advanced technology and machinery.

Under the regime of Saddam Hussein and during the era of sanctions that followed the First Gulf War in 1991, agriculture, along with many other sectors of the Iraqi economy, suffered from gross neglect. Iraqi farmers are enterprising, but they remain largely unfamiliar with newer agriculture technologies and improvements in farming methods.

Now, working from their headquarters near the provincial capital of Baqubah, agricultural advisers on the Diyala PRT have been working closely with local farmers and officials to help them connect with the latest developments in agriculture and there have been some triumphs in recent months.

One achievement was the agricultural exchange program PRT Diyala's Agricultural Advisor Bill Huston organized for three of Diyala's agriculture officials to visit Ohio, a state in America's agricultural heartland.

Working closely with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the State of Ohio, and the U.S. Department of State, Huston established a full itinerary for the group. The visit included stops at an Agricultural Exposition, the Agricultural Research Center at Ohio State University (OSU), several farmers' markets, and other agricultural sites.



American farmer in Ohio describes plastic culture to visiting Iraqi officials and interpreter in white shirt.

At the OSU research center the Iraqis toured a model farm, reviewing newly-developed vegetable varieties, and a fish hatchery operation. At the various farmers' markets the Iraqis were interested in the way farmers marketed their produce, packaging sizes and quantities, as well as display and pricing.

The guests also seized on a number of ideas they planned to bring home with them to Diyala; among them a drip irrigation system, which they saw in large-scale operation that could be very useful in arid and now drought-stricken Diyala.

A new agricultural product that was of interest to the group is Cow Peas. Cow Peas, originating in Africa, are a drought resistant legume that might be a beneficial addition to Diyala's standard crop list. As a legume it aids in nitrogen fixation, the process necessary to rejuvenate exhausted soil.

The crop also reduces weeds and retains ground moisture as a sort of living mulch. If adopted as a part of a regular crop rotation program, Cow Peas could help revitalize Diyala agriculture.

Another project that caught the eyes of the Iraqis is plasticulture; an important part of vegetable cultivation in the U.S. but that has not yet caught on in Iraq.

Plasticulture is the practice of placing plastic film mulch (cover) on the soil and vegetable seedlings are planted through incisions in the plastic. The plastic sheeting acts as a moisture barrier and weed inhibitor. It also can extend the growing season by use of black plastic which warms the soil and white plastic which cools the soil. When combined with a drip irrigation system it provides a very effective mulching effect that has significant implications for agriculture in arid environments.

In an overall assessment of the trip PRT adviser Huston said, "The proof of the tour's success lies in what the agricultural officials believe they gained from the tour. Nine items were listed among their primary concepts and technologies to take back home. More importantly three of these have been included in their provincial budget for implementation."

In fact they have a project waiting for them, Huston added. While they were in Ohio the Iraqi Government funded a drip irrigation program for the province. Having seen the systems in operation in the U.S. the Iraqi officials are excited by the prospects of introducing drip irrigation to Diyala. "That is exactly the sort of outcome that cultural exchange programs like this one are designed to facilitate."