



U.S. EMBASSY - BAGHDAD

2008 Provincial Reconstruction Team News

-USAID Farm Program Puts Money in Iraqi Pockets-

By Elaine Eliah
Special Correspondent

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Taji, Iraq - Hundreds of farmers in this rural district outside Baghdad are reporting double and triple production yields thanks to quality hybrid seed they received from the U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID) "Inma" agriculture program.

In a recent visit to a local farm, Brian Conklin, the USAID representative with the Embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team (EPRT) and Inma's annual horticulture Team Leader, Robert Dose, proudly exhibited the results of the project's efforts to their colleagues and a visiting NBC TV news crew.



Left to right: A local Sheikh, USAID Adviser Brian Conklin, INMA Chief of Party Herschel Weeks and NBC Producer Kianne Sadeq, review increased crop production yields at a farm near Taji; the result of quality hybrid seed donations from USAID.

One local wholesale buyer reported eggplant and green bell pepper production on participating farms has tripled, the latter earning farmers \$12,000/hectare (about 2½ acres) instead of the \$4,000/hectare they'd earned last year.

Cucumbers, just beginning to reach market, are already heavy on the vines. Though the season is still too early to estimate tomato and squash yields, and while all 900 farmers have not yet reported production levels, those who have, say production far exceeds their historic yields – as well as their expectations.

About a dozen local farmers associations assisted EPRT representatives in identifying area farmers for the seed and plastic tunnel (for low-cost early production) distribution program. Inma, which means "growth" in Arabic, is now implementing on-site training for farmers and their families to improve their cultivation practices, farm business management and how to use available technology more safely and effectively.

During the farm tour Inma Chief of Party Herschel Weeks, Ph.D. pointed out tiny pellets of fertilizer scattered around some tomato plants in the dry hot sun. "They were supposed to cover the fertilizer or 'water them in' the soil after applying this," Dr. Weeks explained to NBC Producer Kianne Sadeq. "If the fertilizer isn't dissolved and then absorbed in the soil, it simply evaporates and is wasted."

Rather than distributing sufficient seed to plant farmers' entire holdings, this "technology transfer" project distributed quantities conducive to farmers planting individual demonstration plots. By comparing the growth and production of Inma hybrids with traditionally planted vegetable seed, farmers are learning first hand that investing in their agribusinesses makes sense.

Tripling output – and income – with nothing more than simply investing in quality seed, is a lesson that Inma wants farmers to remember next year. Another lesson is to lengthen the growing season by starting the plants early in inexpensive plastic tunnels.

The Taji Market is already showing signs that new technology is raising the bar for agriculture and agribusiness. Not only can one now buy quality hybrid seed in Taji, stores have begun to stock items such as transplant trays and easy-to-assemble bee hive box kits. The wholesale buyer plans to expand his operation with a storefront to sell improved seeds, fertilizers and plastic for early planting starts.

Individual farmers, their associations and Inma are all looking toward the next step – strengthening other links in the value chain, such as refrigerated transportation and a system of farm credit. Dose, Conklin, and USDA advisor Dan Skotnicki are eager to construct a modern “packing shed” for sorting vegetables by quality and market value. This operation will have cold storage to accommodate the higher yields and increased quality that had previously been seen only in the imported produce from neighboring countries. It was clear during the May assessment tour that even in the shade, produce does not last more than a day or two in Iraq.

This progress was not possible last year and wouldn’t have been possible this year without the early efforts of Colonel Todd McCaffrey commander of the 2nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team “Warrior,” 25th Infantry Division, Multi-National Division – Baghdad. While security has always been their top priority, Colonel McCaffrey recognized that helping residents in this agricultural area generate income was as essential as military operations for securing and maintaining stability.

It was evident on this trip that area residents are eager to end the violence that has disrupted their lives for far too long. The local market was packed with shoppers. Children strolled with soft-serve ice cream cones or raced to be videoed by NBC Cameraman Bredun Edwards. While USAID construction teams lay concrete walkways through the market, many vendors – at their own expense – were paving individual walkways to the front doors of their shops.

“USAID, the PRT and Coalition Forces have created an ‘incubator for development’ in Taji and their excitement is contagious,” said Dr. Weeks. “Growth and development are already creating a bright future for the area’s agriculture business – I believe – far quicker than anyone thought it could.”

PRTs are a civilian-military initiative led by the Department of State. The teams work with coalition partners and provincial and local governments in all of the country’s 18 provinces to promote stabilization through governance and economic programs.