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NEW SEEDS BRING HOPE TO AFGHANISTAN'S FARMERS

Consortium Seeds Provided for Spring Planting in Afghanistan

ALEPPO, SYRIA and KABUL, AFGHANISTAN. 22 April 2002 — Some 60,000 to 70,000 Afghan farmers facing severe food and seed shortages have now received much-needed wheat seeds for this spring's planting season as part of the first emergency relief effort of the Future Harvest Consortium to Rebuild Agriculture in Afghanistan. Together, the Afghan Interim Administration and members of the Consortium moved 3,500 metric tons of improved, high-quality wheat seed over a two week period in early April to farmers in eleven priority provinces where planting for the spring season is underway.

Another 63 metric tons of locally produced wheat seed is being provided by the Future Harvest Consortium to refugees and internally displaced persons passing through Kabul to their homes in mountainous, remote areas of north and northeast Afghanistan.

"Our relief efforts have been efficient and effective," says Nasrat Wassimi, PhD, executive manager of the Future Harvest Consortium's Afghanistan Program. "Despite the earthquake in Afghanistan, we were still able to distribute seed to the northern, higher-elevation regions." The Future Harvest Consortium, which receives a majority of its funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), is being led by the International Center for Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA) based in Syria. Dr. Wassimi and other ICARDA staff working for the Consortium are based in a newly established office in Kabul.

Working with data provided by remote sensing and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technologies, the Consortium members in partnership with the Afghan Government are identifying those areas that have enough soil moisture to ensure the seeds will grow without irrigation given the current extreme scarcity of water. "This key information," says Wassimi, "has been provided by a team of scientists from the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, the United States Geographic Survey, and the U.S. Foreign Agriculture Service."

"After four years of severe drought and extensive damage to Afghanistan's irrigation systems, we need to ensure these critical seeds survive," says H.E. Mohamed Sharif, Deputy Minister of Agriculture of the Afghan Interim Administration. "Placing science at the forefront of our efforts makes it possible."

The wheat seed distribution effort is the first step in the Future Harvest Consortium to Rebuild Agriculture in Afghanistan. Launched in February, the Consortium—made up of scientific organizations, aid agencies, and development

organizations—is also conducting need assessment and diagnostic studies to best identify critical action needed to rebuild agriculture in the drought-ridden and war-torn country.

ICARDA, a Future Harvest Center, arranged for the seed purchase and is monitoring progress throughout the distribution phase and spring growing season. This includes the installation of meteorological stations—called AGROMET stations—that measure moisture, soil temperature at three depths, and wind speed, and then transmit this information via satellite to the Ministry of Agriculture and scientists in Kabul.

The seed, purchased from companies in Pakistan for immediate release in Afghanistan, traveled from Peshawar in Pakistan, through the Kyber Pass, and has been distributed throughout rural and mountainous areas in Afghanistan that are 1,500 to 2,500 meters in medium and high elevation. The temperature is cooler and more moisture is available in these areas, which means crops have a better chance of prospering. The Afghan provinces where seed has been distributed include Badakhshan, Baghlan, Bamian, Ghazni, Ghowr, Kapisa, Oruzgan, Parvan, Samangan, Takhar, and Vardak.

The seed consists of two improved varieties, named Inqilab – 91 and MH 97, specifically adapted for Afghanistan growing conditions. The seed can be used for rainfed or irrigation agriculture and can also be planted in the fall season later this year. The World Food Programme, a United Nations (UN) agency that deals with food shortages and disasters, transported the seeds to Kabul, and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the UN—along with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and local authorities—helped distribute the seeds. NGO participants have included International Medical Corps, Helping Afghan Farmers Organization (HAFO), Agricultural Development of Afghanistan (ADA), International Mercy Corps (IMC), SOLIDARITES, FOCUS, and ACTED under the coordination of the Interim Ministry of Agriculture in Afghanistan.

Seed planting will conclude by late April. “Fortunately, good amounts of rainfall were received very recently in the central areas around Kabul, and no irrigation water is needed for crop establishment in those areas” says A. Manan, senior advisor for the Consortium’s Seed Security Project based in Kabul. Harvests are expected sometime between September and October later this year. After the harvest, the fields will be plowed again, and the next planting season will commence.

“We are hopeful that, given the improved, high-quality nature of these seeds, we will see higher than average crop yields this autumn,” says Adel El-Beltagy, PhD, director general of ICARDA. “By adding fertilizer, another recent USAID donation to help Afghan farmers, we might actually see a doubling of wheat production.”

The Future Harvest Consortium to Rebuild Agriculture in Afghanistan has received US\$12 million dollars in funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Canadian-based International Development Research Center. Other donors have also expressed an interest in the consortium, which hopes to obtain additional funds for the program’s efforts.

ICARDA's (www.icarda.org) mission is to improve the welfare of people and alleviate poverty through research and training in dry areas of the developing world by increasing production, productivity, and nutritional quality of food, while preserving and enhancing the natural resource base. ICARDA is a Future Harvest Center.

Future Harvest (www.futureharvest.org) is a global nonprofit organization that builds awareness and support for food and environmental research for a world with less poverty, a healthier human family, well-nourished children, and a better environment. Future Harvest is an initiative of 16 food and environmental research centers that receive funding from the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR).