

News briefing

Afghan farmers receive seed and fertiliser



IFDC translator, Yousuf; Dr. Raymond Fort, IFDC consultant; and IFDC chief of party in Afghanistan, Ross Everson, purchase flat bread from Afghan children. The bread, which contains either potatoes or spinach, is deep fried.

Credit: Feisal Beig, IFDC

Amid the destruction left by more than two decades of war in Afghanistan there will soon be fields of high yielding wheat, because of the efforts of international organisations.

Thousands of tonnes of wheat seed has arrived in the country aboard a convoy of 200 trucks. That is part of the USAID-sponsored-seed relief operation being implemented by the World Food programme (WFP) and the International Centre for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas (ICARDA). Helping to provide the fertiliser is the International Fertiliser Development Centre (IFDC). The organisations are part of the international consortium which was set up to get Afghanistan's agriculture producing as quickly as possible.

The WFP arranged the transportation of the wheat seed from Pakistan to Kabul, and ICARDA staff have handled distribution within the country.

Despite the war, farmers have contin-

ued to plant wheat but as little fertiliser was applied, yields are low. With the 2002 spring crop, which will be harvested later this year, it is hoped the distribution of seed and fertiliser will cause the yields to soar.

IFDC hopes that about 70,000 farmers in 700 villages will benefit. They receive vouchers which they can use to obtain fertiliser. They bicycle to the nearest village to redeem their fertiliser

voucher at a farm supply dealer and peddle back home with two 110-pound bags of fertiliser strapped to their bike. Farmers approved for the aid receive a bag of fertiliser for each sack of wheat seed they plant.

"They really need more fertiliser, but it's a start," said Ian Gregory, director of IFDC's market development division.

The farmers are also receiving information on how to reduce weeds in their fields and other farming tips from IFDC. Gregory expects the new seed, fertiliser and improved weed control to at least double the yield of most wheat fields.

When the wheat is harvested and the crop sold, the farmer will pay his village government \$9 for each bag of fertiliser he received. The money can be used to improve the infrastructure.

Gregory said IFDC is working with local leaders in Afghanistan to prevent the fertiliser from being used for growing poppies, which supply raw ingredients for opium. Agriculture organisations are searching for alternative high-value crops, such as saffron.

Convincing farmers to stop growing poppies will be difficult. He said farmers growing wheat, corn, cotton, rice and other legal crops earn only a fraction of what they could from poppies.

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An Afghan man carrying a 110-pound bag of fertiliser on his bicycle listens as IFDC consultant Dr. Raymond Fort talks.

Credit: Feisal Beig, IFDC