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USAID funds program to boost Afghanistan agriculture

Saturday December 27, 2003 (1357 PST)

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Online): A three-year program to rehabilitate Afghanistan's largely agrarian economy is getting into gear with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) so far having injected \$153 million in projects ranging from repairing irrigation canals and rural roads to providing loans to farmers to boosting food supplies with improved technology.

Chemonics International, a Washington-based consulting firm that specializes in development, has contracted with USAID to implement the program known as the Rebuilding Agricultural Markets Program (RAMP).

A Chemonics manager, Robert Flick, said RAMP serves as "a central clearinghouse" for dozens of projects designed "to speed up results and jumpstart" the agricultural economy, which has stagnated from two decades of war and civil disorder.

When the program is completed in June 2006, RAMP will have directly impacted the lives of "at least 3.5 million people, or one-seventh of Afghanistan's population," Flick said. He said RAMP's indirect consequences would touch as many as 60 percent of the Afghan people.

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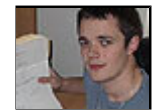


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Flick said USAID Administrator Andrew Natsios inspected several RAMP projects in December during his visit to Afghanistan.

Without making any formal commitments, Natsios told Chemonics officials in Kabul that he would try to add another \$20 million for rehabilitating the Helmand Valley irrigation project in southwestern Afghanistan and "possibly" add another \$40 million for rebuilding irrigation canals and farm-to-market roads in other parts of Afghanistan, according to Flick.

RAMP is implementing projects in the provinces of Kunduz, Baghlan, Laghman, Parwan, Nangarhar, Logar, Wardak, Ghazni, Paktia, Kandahar and Helmand that form an arc from the north to the east and then to the south and west of the country.

One of the problems facing the RAMP project is that after two decades of war, Afghanistan does not have a viable banking and financial system that can provide loans to farmers, Flick said.

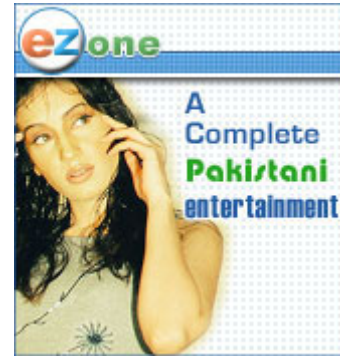
Flick said Chemonics has some \$25 million committed to the rural finance services component of RAMP, with \$4 million earmarked for micro-enterprise loans (under \$1,000) and another \$1 million for technical assistance in setting up that system. The remaining \$20 million is for larger agribusiness loans to help farmers pay for tractors and other farm machinery, he said.

Flick said that Chemonics is in the process of signing its micro-enterprise loan agreement directly with the Afghan Ministry for Reconstruction and Rural Development (MRRD) which will help to disburse the loans.

However, the setting up of a system to disburse the larger agribusiness loans has become quite a challenge.

Flick explained that agricultural lending is more risky than other types of lending and new banks tend to seek customers from more secure sectors of the economy where collateral for loans is more tangible than future harvests.

As a result, Flick said Chemonics is thinking of disbursing those loans through "a non-bank financial intermediary." He said he hopes by the spring of 2004 "a non-bank intermediary" will be in place to begin the loan process.



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Flick said that some of the projects involving the provision of improved seed varieties and farming practices for greater yields of agricultural crops are already in place primarily through earlier programs run by the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA), based in Aleppo, Syria.

Now Chemonics, in partnership with ICARDA and the Future Harvest Consortium to Rebuild Agriculture in Afghanistan (FHCRAA), is planning to send seed scientists and agronomists to set up around 1,000 "on-farm demonstrations" in 27 districts in the provinces of Kunduz, Nangarhar, Parwan, Ghazni, and Helmand. Demonstrations will focus on six principal crops of wheat, rice, mung bean, potato, onion and tomato. Better farming techniques through use of higher-yielding seed varieties and fertilizers, weed and pest control, and better distribution of irrigation water would also be demonstrated.

RAMP programs also include the possibility of commercial poultry production and improved animal husbandry practices.

In partnership with the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), pilot projects for raising poultry at the village level have already been set up. These projects are employing Afghan women, who have traditionally tended poultry in their village homes. Poultry producers groups have been established for village women who have been trained in modern techniques of poultry production such as proper feeds and vaccinations against diseases.

Afghanistan is reported to have lost up to 80 percent of its livestock during the four years of drought from 1997 to 2001. The remaining herds have suffered from the lack of feed and access to veterinary care. The RAMP project sent two leading Afghan veterinarians to attend the United Nations Organization for Animal Health Conference in Istanbul, Turkey in late September 2003 to get an overview of the livestock problems in the region.

Flick said that RAMP is in the process of setting up a private sector veterinary services program by working with a group in The Netherlands which operates in the manner of the French "Doctors Without Borders." These "veterinarians without borders," as Flick describes them, will set up livestock health clinics in Afghanistan and train local Afghan veterinarians on a "part-grant and part-loan"

basis. The program is expected to get into operation sometime in January 2004, he said.

End.

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