AGRICULTURAL PLAN NEEDED FOR NORTHERN REGION

Amman AL-UFUQ AL-IQTISADI in Arabic No 3, 14-20 Apr 82 pp 14-15

[Article by Maryud al-Tall: "The State's Agricultral Plan for the Northern Desert: the Time Has Come To Set Out To Achieve Food Security without Delay; the Time Has Come To Focus on Basics"]

[Text] This is a preliminary study, which is being presented to officials and put up for discussion. It is a general study whose broad outlines are being presented in AL-UFUQ for reasons that have to do with the press.

This is not a study for the farmers of our country; it is a study for the state. Amidst the deterioration of our agricultural conditions and the shrinkage in the class of farmers, it behooves the state--and no one else--to assume control of the situation. The measures undertaken by the state to take a small store keeper to court for a food supply violation to protect the urban consumer should be expanded; they should become commensurate with the volume of agricultural production and should serve the interests of both producers and consumers.

This study deals with a semi-rectangular area of land in the northern desert that extends to the south of the al-Husayniyat farm west of al-Mafriq; it extends to the north to the Syrian border; to the east, to the area of Sabha and Sabahiyah; and to the west, to the village of Surrah between al-Mafriq and al-Ramtha.

The reason why this site was selected lies in the fact that it has become an important source of products, especially vegetables, which are produced by irrigated farming. These vegetables supply the markets of Irbid, al-Mafriq, al-Zarqa' and 'Amman. In addition, some of these vegetables are exported to Arab markets and especially Iraq.

There are now 204 working artesian wells in this area; a large number of these wells is owned by farmers in the area. According to the figures of the Natural Resources Authority 49.6 million cubic meters of water are taken out of these wells every year. In addition, 7.6 million cubic meters of water are taken out of the wells of Wadi al-'Aqib and out of five wells in Sama al-Sarhan for the public sector. The public sector also takes out 1.2 million cubic meters of water from three new wells in the same area. On 12 July 1971 the Natural Resources Authority cancelled permits it had issued for drilling 52 wells. The authority claimed that the permits were cancelled to avoid increasing the number of artesian wells and to avoid increasing water pumping activity which would [adversely] affect the

ground water supply. The authority stated that the cancellations will stand until special studies on the volume of water in the area's water table are completed and the status of its real capacity is known.

Until the authority's studies are completed, it is important to give this area special priority to ensure that this water resource is well utilized and to save farmers, who spent millions of dinars on these wells, from problems of marketing [their] vegetables since vegetables provide the fastest return on their investment. We are calling upon the state to consider this region a model for a rational, programmed and well-considered utilization plan that would provide the essence of a plan with the agreement of farmers in the area for the development of water, agriculture, pastures and the environment with the agreement.

We are saying that the purpose of this integrated plan is to increase agricultural production and to direct it toward our food security, especially with regard to basic crops such as grains and feed. This can help stop our total reliance on imported wheat, and it would meet some of the country's needs for imported meat and dairy products. It is not normal for millions to be invested in the production of white meat--chicken--while we continue to rely totally on the condition and prices of the world feed market.

1. This area is about 1 million donums of arable land, with no reclamation cost to speak of required. The quantity of water that is presently available can irrigate more than 15,000 donums planted with wheat and feed. The problem of unavailable workers can be solved by using machines that are not costly. In this area we can produce no less than 50,000 tons of wheat annually. This wheat would be usually harvested in June, and after the harvest, the land and the water can be utilized to produce other vegetables that are being produced now.

The integrated development of this area in the light of what has been stated requires that the state and its various agencies, each within its own jurisdiction, execute the following steps:

A. A firm determination of how the land is to be used is to be made on the basis of dividing it for purposes of irrigation and intense cultivation. Trees are to be planted on the roads and borders of this land and a certain area is to be set aside for pasture in accordance with soil analysis studies and land classification.

B. Current land divisions are to be broken up and the land is to be re-divided without doing injustice to landowners so that a balanced, geometrical system for the land can be achieved. Such a system would help the construction of rural roads between the [various] land [divisions] and would make it easy to lay irrigation pipes or ducts beside the land without having these intersect each other or be laid down in a haphazard fashion.

C. Construction in villages and residential communities in the area is to be controlled and confined to certain areas which would take into account residential expansion and essential services.

D. Studies on crops that will be produced in these areas are to be modernized in the light of experiments conducted by the Ministry of Agriculture and by international and foreign organizations in the areas of al-Jafar, al-'Arja,

al-Husayniyah, al-Wadi al-Abyad, al-Dalil, and al-Daysah. These studies are to be modernized for the purpose of directing agriculture in this area to benefit from these experiments, to utilize them in planting cycles and to diversify farming activities instead of concentrating on a limited number of crops as is the case at present. If the state guarantees the crop, the availability of water may help the farmer turn away from the vegetables which he is presently cultivating to the cultivation of clover which has proven to be successful and profitable. To farmers, planting vegetables is considered somewhat risky because of marketing problems, control by middlemen and the total inability of the state to set down a marketing policy. Or farmers may turn to cultivating improved varieties of wheat and irrigated barley; these have been produced in Jordan at a rate of half a ton per donum in the case of Mexican wheat which was the foundation of the Green Revolution which made India self-sufficient in wheat. India, which used to be one of the countries most dependent on U.S. food aid, is now exporting some of its surplus wheat.

If the foregoing steps can be carried out quickly, the area and its water can be utilized as an integrated unit with the cooperation of the state, as a guide and a helper, and with the cooperation of the owners of the wells and the land. This cooperation may take place on the basis of cooperative societies or an association of farmers. Or it may take the form of an agricultural development company with a large capital. That company would be formed by farmers who would be assisted by the state through its special funding and guidance organizations.

If this experiment succeeds, it will constitute a cornerstone of agricultural production. Any other area which has ground water can then be developed by utilizing this experiment.

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CSO: 4404/450