

SYRIA

STEPS TO PRESERVE, DEVELOP ARID REGIONS DETAILED

Damascus TISHRIN in Arabic 21 Mar 85 p 4

[Text] The total area of the country is 18.5 million hectares, divided into five agricultural zones, according to the amount of rainfall in each.

The desert is classified in the fifth zone, because it receives less than 200 millimeters of rainfall annually. It is the principal grassland area in the country, covering approximately 10 million hectares and holding 80 percent of the country's cattle resources.

In 1982, a conference on development of the Syrian desert examined its aggravated situation, and drew up the plans needed for its exploitation in ways which will preserve its natural characteristics.

It reached the following conclusions: continued implementation of the sections of the Syrian program for development of the grasslands; material and moral support for all the needs of this program is necessary; formation of a committee to study laws to protect the desert; creation of a committee for the desert to set up a program to develop the desert and solve the difficulties which it faces; and establishment of a general directorate for the desert, grasslands and cattle.

Three years after the conference, where do we stand in our utilization of the desert?

In a meeting with Eng Hazim al-Samman, head of the directorate of the desert in the Ministry of Agriculture, it was pointed out that great effort has been expended to carry out the recommendations of the first conference on development of the desert. The most important results of the conference have been issuance of a decree by the Ministry of Agriculture and Agricultural Reform prohibiting cultivation of grains on desert lands, irrespective of the circumstances of the investment, and limitation by the directorate for the desert, grasslands and cattle of utilization of these lands to cultivation of various grassland shrubs, under a special utilization permit.

In this manner, the major cause of decline of the desert grasslands has been ended, and protection of these grasslands as fodder reserves for cattle has been achieved.

The programs for development of the desert have the goal of rebuilding and developing the vegetation covering, which has declined. They aim to develop and preserve the natural features of the desert, to return vegetation and animal life to desert areas, while assuring economic and social stability to the residents, the majority of whom are bedouin, nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples dependent on livestock breeding as their sole source of income.

Cooperative Associations for Improvement of Grasslands and Livestock Breeding

Engineer al-Samman adds that the desert grassland has been divided among cooperative associations. Each association has been assigned a specific area of desert land, in correlation with the number of members and their cattle, taking into account the utilization rights of the bedouin who have made use of some grassland areas in order to avoid some of the social problems which have arisen.

These associations are protecting the grazing land assigned to them, applying fodder rotation, and working to add to the vegetation covering of their lands by cultivating grassland shrubs. The cooperatives are given complete support by the state, particularly long-term loans to build storage facilities for fodder in each cooperative, short-term loans to purchase their central food needs from the fodder exchange fund, and interest-free loans to plant grassland shrubs.

There are 270 associations, with a total of 32,608 members and 4,922,788 animals.

Establishment of Livestock-Breeding Centers

Along the lines of the cooperative associations, allocation has been made for 10 livestock-breeding centers in desert grassland areas. The centers will seek to protect the natural vegetation cover of the grassland, to utilize decline areas, to apply the principles of sound pasture rotation, and to act as guidance centers for neighboring cooperative associations. Also, they will undertake the important task of distributing high-quality rams to the cooperatives, in order to raise production, and will set up schools for sons of herdsmen and bedouin.

Cooperative Associations in Marginal Areas

Cooperatives have also been established whose duties complement those of the grassland cooperatives. They will seek to raise the volume of livestock production in desert areas to the point of the neighboring grasslands. They will transport the livestock to feedlots of the cooperatives to fatten them on concentrated fodder for 90 days, then transport the cattle to market. This will provide a major portion of local consumption. Fattening of cattle is clearly an important industry for the country. It contributes to achieving stability for livestock breeding and providing considerable quantities of hard currency to the state gained from exporting the surplus from local markets or from fattening cattle for a time during their transit. These cooperatives are supported by loans needed to build storage facilities for fodder and to purchase the fodder needed from the fodder establishment.

There are 48 of these cooperatives, with a total of 6,471 members and about 1,750,000 animals.

Cultivation of Deteriorated Grassland in Shrubs Able to Withstand Dry Conditions

Production of approved grassland seedlings has begun in 10 special nurseries distributed among the provinces. The directorate of the desert, grasslands and cattle, and its agencies in the provinces, are transferring these seedlings to sites for their cultivation in areas of the associations for the improvement of the grasslands, and to any breeders who desire them. The expense of this will be borne by the ministry, without compensation. Approximately 9,144,000 seedlings were produced in the 1983 season, with a production focus of more than 70 percent on domestic varieties, such as "al-rauthah". Also, a center for production of 10 tons of local grassland seedlings was established at Qasr al-Hayr for production of 10 tons of local grassland seedlings annually, and to acclimatize them to the dry conditions of the desert and semi-arid areas. This will reduce the regular expenditures of production of grasslands plants in nurseries, and the activities associated with their cultivation in perennial areas of land.

46 Million Pounds for Desert Development

The Fifth 5-Year Plan includes 46 million pounds for the project to develop the desert. It is intended to produce 45 million grassland plants able to withstand dry conditions, to establish a center for cattle breeding, to improve the grassland in the provinces of Dar'a and Hims, and to fence in the center for cattle breeding to protect its pasture.

In addition, it will assure means of transportation and the equipment needed by the grassland nurseries and the cattle centers, implementation of training programs for members of the cooperatives, putting the borders of the new cooperative associations in the desert areas on maps to clarify the boundary markers for each association, and distribution of maps to each association.

18.5 Million Pounds to Renovate and Equip Desert Wells

The sum of 18.5 million pounds has been earmarked for 48 current wells, to provide equipment, maintenance, fuel and spare batteries, and to build housing and provide sufficient supplies of the needs of daily life for workers at the wells.

Five new wells taken from the Ministry of Petroleum have been put into operation in Dayr al-Zuwwar province, and 100 wells have been set.

65 Million for Livestock-Breeding Development

The Fifth 5-Year Plan sets aside 65 million pounds for loans to cattle-breeding and fattening associations and associations for grassland improvement in order to purchase fodder requirements, at an interest rate of 5.5 percent. It will also be used to carry out studies of desert development, to provide veterinary care for cattle, to secure 60 mobile units and to build 6 livestock tanks, as well as to purchase instruments and vaccines.

Supervision By the Higher Committee for Desert Development of All Development Activities

Among the most important measures taken since the conference have been creation of a Higher Committee for Desert Development, chaired by the deputy prime minister for service matters. It includes various ministers concerned with the desert sector and the general directorate for the desert. It oversees this sector, and works to develop the deteriorated natural resources and to preserve what remains. It also works to provide the various necessary services to residents of this sector, by coordination with other administrations, and to follow up on the programs for preservation of grassland resources by creation of cattle centers for "protected" animals. It is concerned with guidance and educational programs for members of the cooperatives and for workers specializing in this sector. Sufficient financial assets have been provided to assure service projects for the residents of the desert in conformity with its harsh environment. It works for educational and cultural development where it is possible by these means to attain the desired goal of preservation of the natural resources.

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CSO: 4404/307