

AMERICAN GIVING | Strengthening communities through generosity

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Farmer-Soldiers from Missouri Help Afghan Farmers Modernize Unit works in Nangarhar Province on slaughter facilities, irrigation



The Missouri National Guard's Curtis H. Brandt surveys fish farms in Afghanistan to help local farmers. (Missouri National Guard)

By Judi Hasson
Special Correspondent

Washington -- The Missouri National Guard arrived in Afghanistan in February with a big mission: modernize agriculture practices and increase food production in a war-torn country.

The task is not an easy one, but the 50-member Army Agri-Business Development Team has been working long hours with farmers and community officials in Nangarhar Province. The province is in

eastern Afghanistan near the Pakistan border.

The team's goals include improving irrigation systems and providing effective methods for fertilizing, planting, harvesting, marketing and storage of agricultural crops.

They hope to help modernize a slaughter facility, develop a juicing and canning facility and improve livestock health through mobile vet clinics.

"Because of the differences in culture, resources and production methods, these initial projects were designed to incorporate Afghan solutions with U.S. techniques," said Master Sergeant Larry Godsey of Marshall, Missouri, who replied to a series of e-mailed questions from *America.gov*.

Many of the initial projects will be tested to find the best solutions before they are replicated, he said.

The National Guard team, participating in this pilot project in cooperation with the Missouri Farm Bureau and the University of Missouri, hopes to draw a blueprint that can be followed by other Army National Guard units from around the United States. It gets resources and guidance from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Agency for International Development.

Members include 10 agriculture specialists, mechanics who can fix farm equipment, a manager of a large grain elevator, veterinarians and others with farming backgrounds.

These citizen-soldiers face major challenges in Afghanistan despite their years of farming experience. "Even with the use of local interpreters, many of the ideas that we try to communicate are lost in translation," Godsey said. "It is difficult to explain to someone how a modern seed cleaner works if they have never seen it before."

There are also local customs and issues of property rights and tribal leadership that must be solved on a routine basis. If the team wants to construct a building or dig a well, it has to find out which village elder has authority to grant permission to use the land. In many villages, property usage and ownership is decided in meetings with family elders.

The work is important for Afghanistan, where agriculture makes up 45 percent of the gross domestic product and employs more than 70 percent of the population, but where farming practices are inefficient or outdated.

Many Afghan fields are used to grow opium poppy plants, which provide the raw material used to make heroin. The U.S. and Afghan governments hope to establish a viable agri-business that provides farmers with alternatives.

Much Afghan farming is for subsistence rather than for big markets. A large farm may only include five to six acres. And there is limited access to fertilizer or certified

seed, Sergeant First Class Russell Pierce of Mayview, Missouri, said in e-mails.

"This type of farming is completely different than what I am used to in Missouri," Pierce said. "There are no large-scale market outlets. Everything here is sold at roadside stands or small bazaars."

The farmers in Nangarhar grow wheat, corn, rice, cotton, sunflower, beans, sugar cane, watermelon, various fruits, vegetables or nuts.

There are different levels of elevation in the province, which means that some of the farmers in the valley have harvested their first crop of wheat and planted other crops, while the farmers at the higher elevations are only able to get one crop rotation, Godsey said.

Water remains one of the biggest problems. The Guard unit is testing sustainable methods for pumping water and working on watershed management to capture snow melt and rainwater runoff for irrigation.

Working conditions are tough for the Guard, with temperatures during the day ranging from 110 to 130 degrees Fahrenheit. When they are not struggling to adjust to heat, they are struggling to convince farmers to alter practices that are generations-old.

Despite their uncertainties and language differences, Afghan farmers have been warm and receptive to the Missouri National Guard, according to Godsey.

The work is fulfilling. "There is a great sense of pride when people in desperate need of assistance come to you for help, and you are able to provide that help," Godsey said. "This country has suffered through decades of war. For the most part, the people of Nangarhar are good people and deserve a better way of life."

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