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**“It’s like farming
back in the States.
It’s a gamble, and
you pray a lot.”**

*Sgt. Brian Stark
Nebraska
National Guard*

CORNHUSKERS IN AFGHANISTAN

PLANTING NEW IDEAS



Sgt. William Jones, a member of the Nebraska National Guard’s agricultural development team, applies fertilizer to newly planted fruit trees north of Kabul. The Guard troops are teaching Afghan farmers about drip irrigation, crop rotation and animal breeding.

A Nebraska National Guard team works with farmers in Afghanistan to improve agricultural practices



By MATTHEW HANSEN
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

The man they call A.K. was the first Afghan farmer to try things the Cornhusker way.

A.K. watched closely as the Nebraska National Guard members — many of them Nebraska farm boys — demonstrated how to grow grapes above ground instead of down in the dirt.

He listened intently as the members of the Nebraska agricultural development team explained the value of drip irrigation — why it would work better than flooding his crops with water. So A.K. banged some concrete posts

into the ground, strung two strands of wire on them and built himself a uniquely Afghan grapevine on his land north of Kabul.

He researched irrigation and started watering his fields as the Nebraskans had recommended, conserving rivers of water for his drought-stricken country in the process.

A.K.’s neighbors noticed. Soon they started chatting up the Nebraska Guard team, 53 people assigned to the tall yearlong task of improving agriculture in and around the decimated Panjshir Valley. We’d also like to learn farming the

Afghan: Farmers adopt Nebraskans' ideas when they see results

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Nebraska way, they said.

"The thing about an Afghan farmer is, if they see something working across the road, they want it themselves, too," said Col. Mike Johnson, commander of the ag development team, by phone from Afghanistan's Bagram Air Base.

"The bottom line is that they are interested in anything that provides more food for their family," Johnson said.

The Nebraska team's task is that simple: Help Afghan farmers put food on their tables in an area once known for its beautiful orchards.

But the task, as with nearly everything in Afghanistan, is fraught with difficulty. The Panjshir Valley has endured nearly three decades of nonstop war. The Soviets, Afghan warlords and the Taliban have bombed, burned and chopped down every fruit tree.

You think farming in Nebraska is tough? Try plowing behind a team of starving oxen and planting by throwing seed haphazardly onto the dry, cracked ground.

Try irrigating without electricity, keeping records without knowing how to read or write and then harvesting as the Taliban and their sympathizers blow up roadside bombs around your increasingly terrorized village.

When the Nebraskans arrived in October, a group of farmers showed Sgt. Brian Stark an ear of Afghan corn. It was maybe

three inches long, as short as a person's ring finger.

Johnson couldn't get over the bare patches of perfectly farmable ground.

The people were hungry. The animals were hungry. And yet "there's just a lot of dormant ground, nothing on it, not even grass," Johnson said.

The colonel quickly learned one reason for the dirt patches: The Afghans were eating everything available and saving no excess seed in the process. The Nebraskans started teaching them how best to store enough seed for the next crop.

Many of the farmers plant wheat in the fall and then corn in the same field in the spring, a crop rotation that yanks nutrients out of the ground and leads to poorer and poorer yields.

The ag development team told the farmers to plant alfalfa on low-yielding fields instead.

A Guardsman from the Valentine area is an instructor at two local universities, using PowerPoint lectures to teach the Afghans about animal breeding and diseases.

The Guard troops, half of whom farm in Nebraska, have dug and inspected wells and experimented with new grasses. They have put out pamphlets on insect control and given radio interviews about irrigation.

When all else fails, the Nebraskans simply point to the results: They've purposely planted test plots of wheat and corn right next to Afghan fields.

"Here's the old way, and



Many of the National Guardsmen helping Afghans with their farming techniques also farm back home in Nebraska.

there's the new way, side by side," Johnson said. "Then (the Afghans) are real quick to change."

It hasn't been an entirely warm and fuzzy year for the Guard.

They had hopes of demonstrating a center pivot irrigation system, but that and several other ambitious projects are now on a waiting list behind other, more pressing jobs.

And it's getting harder and harder for the Nebraskans to

are far safer than areas in the Taliban strongholds in southern Afghanistan.

But when the Nebraska ag development team members return to Nebraska around Labor Day, they will do so knowing they've nudged the Afghan farmers closer to success.

They will know they've helped plant 20,000 fruit trees in the Panjshir Valley, trees that will bear countless apricots, cherries, peaches and pomegranates in four years.

And they will remember that they gathered north of Bagram Air Base and put up a grain bin.

This particular bin once sat unused in southwest Nebraska, one of 11 old steel bins donated by farmers contacted by Sgt. Eldon Kuntzelman of Imperial.

And now it will stand in northern Afghanistan, a symbol of rebirth in an area desperately in need of new chapters.

A.K., the bin's new owner, has promised that he'll let his neighbors store their crops in the bin, as well.

The Nebraskans hope A.K. and his friends will soon have more to store. The drought eased this spring, and the region has thus far avoided the damaging flooding of years past.

The Nebraskans and the Afghans will spend the summer asking God for gentle rain.

"It's like farming back in the States," Stark said. "It's a gamble, and you pray a lot."

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