ASF Successfully Completes its Date-Palm Protection Project

Lahore: Agribusiness Support Fund (ASF) recently completed a Rs. 31.0 million date-palm protection project with matching-grant support of Rs. 15.5 million. This was the first time in the history of the country that such a project was implemented at the macro level to cater to the needs of date-palm growers covering all the major date-palm producing regions of Pakistan.

The project was initiated in June 2010 wherein over 300,000 Tyvek bags were distributed to the date-palm growers and training programs were organized in Good Agricultural Practices. With the assistance of local Associations, NGOs and Rural Support Programs, the project was successfully implemented in Khairpur & Sukkar (Sindh), Muzaffar Garh (Punjab), D. I. Khan (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) and Turbat & Punjgoor (Balochistan).

Tyvek bag is a paper like material and a product of Dupont USA which has proved to be very successful in date producing countries. It saves the produce from rain, dust, insects, birds, etc. which are harmful for the crop and can have a detrimental impact on the livelihood of growers.

Pakistan is rated among the largest producers of date-palm in the world with over 150 different varieties. Several varieties are similar to those cultivated in Iraq, Iran and the Gulf countries like Hillawi, Zahdi, Shakeri, Basri etc. In Pakistan, Balochistan is the largest date producing province followed by Sindh, Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, with the exception of the last two years when the lead was taken over by Sindh due to drought in Balochistan. Popular varieties produced in the country are: Aseel, Zahidi, Fasli, Maazwati, Dhakki, Kharbalian, Begum Jangi, Dagh, Goakna, Tota, Karwan, Hillavi, Khudrawi and Mozawati Gulistan, Jowansur, Lango, Sabzo, Kharuba, Karbala, and Kupro.

Each year, monsoon clashes with the dates ripening season and a few minutes of rain can destroy up to 80% of the crop. To avoid unforeseen risk, growers are compelled to process un-ripened dates into low-priced 'chowharas' before the start of monsoon season. The use of centuries-old unhygienic practices and hesitation in using modern techniques deteriorates the produce quality and badly affects the growers' income. Such practices further contribute towards 20%-30% post harvest losses each year.

Last year, ASF sponsored a pilot project in Khairpur (Sindh) by distributing 20,000 Tyvek bags among the farming community. It was demonstrated that use of the bags not only saved the produce from normally expected perils but also improved the quality and taste as well as increased its yield. The improved quality also enabled the few growers who used these bags to attain premium prices.

Owing to the success of the pilot project, ASF launched a massive project this year covering major dates producing areas of Pakistan i.e. Khairpur/Sukkar, D.I.Khan, Muzaffar Garh and Turbat/Panjgoor. Training programs were organized to create awareness in good agricultural practices and 300,000 Tyvek bags were also distributed

among the growers. The program was implemented with the assistance of local Growers Associations, NGOs and Rural Support Programs. The aim of this project was to introduce this proven technology to the farming community which could have a great impact on their livelihood and poverty alleviation in those regions. Date-palm Research Institute in Khairpur, Sindh has also been assigned the responsibility to test Tyvek bags on different varieties of dates at different locations, the report of which is expected within this month.

In addition, ASF has also introduced the drying techniques being used by the farming communities of Gilgit for date-palm. In this regard ASF provided grant support to a progressive grower of Khairpur for construction of a specially designed solar dryer for dates. The construction of the solar dryer was completed recently and the first lot of 1.5 tons of date-palm was successfully dried, producing fine quality dates under hygienic environment. The beauty of this dryer is that it neither requires expensive solar panels nor electricity but operates entirely on sun-light (heat) with zero operating cost. Seeing the success other progressive farmers have approached ASF for grant to construct similar drying units in their respective areas.

Agribusiness Support Fund is a not-for-profit Company, established by the Ministry of Food Agriculture & Livestock (MINFAL) and supported by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) under the Agribusiness Development & Diversification Project (ADDP). ASF extends its support in the shape of matching grants to agribusiness concerns in the Horticulture and Livestock sectors. While having its office at Lahore, ASF is also represented by the offices of ADDP, located in the four provinces as well as FATA, FANA and the AJK.