

SCIENTISTS SEARCH FOR SOLUTIONS TO IRAQ'S SALTY FARMLAND

The high level of salt threatening two-thirds of Iraq's irrigated farmland as well as many other countries is being targeted by a group of Iraqi and international researchers and policymakers.

The Iraq Salinity Project aims to develop long-term strategies to manage salinity in central and southern Iraq.

It is coordinated by the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA) and is scheduled to run until the end of 2014.

Kamal Hussein, Iraqi deputy minister of environment, told *SciDev.Net* that farmers abandon an estimated 25,000 hectares of farmland in central and southern Iraq every year because of elevated salt levels.

Watering crops [through traditional irrigation canals] is one of the main causes of the salinity problem in Iraq, said Hussein, pointing out that the irrigation water washes out the salt (from natural sources and fertilisers) from soil in the more elevated northern parts of the country and brings it to the southern parts.

Nasri Haddad, coordinator of ICARDA's West Asia Regional Program, told *SciDev.Net*: The project will develop in-depth research to identify how to rid the water and soil of salinity, and suggest strategies for water management to achieve this goal.

He added that rising salt levels in soil and water is a global problem.

This project is a glimmer of hope to many other countries that have a bitter experience with salinity, he said, adding that the techniques to tackle the problem developed in Iraq will be made available to other countries.

The project is operating at three different scales: regionally to identify the distribution of salt-affected soils and causes of soil salinity; locally to assess the irrigation and drainage infrastructure; and on farms to find out the best ways to control salt levels in soil.

Kasim Ahmed Saliem, the project coordinator and the head of the planning and follow-up department at the Ministry of Agriculture, said: We hope that there will be a second phase of the project based on the results that will be achieved, but this depends on the ability to bring additional support from donors to finance long-term efforts to combat salinity.

The initiative involves the training of Iraqi researchers and linking the country with potential donors to ensure the project's long-term sustainability. It also aims to establish reliable agricultural infrastructure.

The project is funded by the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) and the Italian government, and implemented by ICARDA in partnership with the University of Western Australia, Australia's national science agency CSIRO, the International Water Management Institute and the International Center for Biosaline Agriculture.

Source: <http://www.scidev.net/global/farming/news/scientists-search-for-solutions-to-iraq-s-salty-farmland.html>