

U.S. Army Staff Sergeant Eric Pugh meets with young Afghans near an orchard demonstration project in Kunar province, Afghanistan.



DIRT WARRIORS

DEPLOY ISU TRAINING IN AFGHANISTAN By Willy Klein

The “Dirt Warriors” landed on Afghan soils in July ready to help rebuild the agricultural infrastructure and increase capacity of agricultural systems in the Kunar province.

The 60 members of the Iowa National Guard 734th Agri-Business Development Team (ADT) coined their own nickname. The Iowa Army and Air National Guard members are also livestock and crop producers, veterinarians, agronomists, engineers, foresters, marketers and agri-business professionals.

Their first order of business was to become familiar with Kunar province land, farmers, agricultural professionals and government officials. ADT senior officers focused on building relationships and learning how the Afghans see their agricultural needs. Such conversations and assessments gave the team solid footing for developing practical, sustainable initiatives to implement relatively quickly.

And training from Iowa State University is helping them put their plans into action.

Col. Craig Bargfrede, commander of the 734th, worked closely with Iowa



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John Sawyer, extension soil fertility specialist, tells ADT members that correctly gathering soil samples is the same in Iowa and Kunar province. But, when teaching how to use analysis they must take into account the current knowledge and practices of the farmers which are much different in Afghanistan.

First Lieutenant Scott Rottinghaus meets with agricultural officials of Kunar province at the Governor's Compound in Asadabad, Afghanistan.

State to design a training program for ADT in June. ISU faculty and extension specialists covered crops and soils, animal husbandry, small-scale poultry production and vegetable production.

"ISU Extension and the colleges of Veterinary Medicine and Agriculture and Life Sciences gave ADT members a common, basic knowledge they are using in Kunar," says Gerald Miller, interim vice president for ISU Extension and Outreach. "The ADT learned about subject matter, but as importantly they observed professional educators teaching in a variety of learning environments."

Scott Rottinghaus, first lieutenant, and Eric Pugh, staff sergeant, are two ADT members anxious to put their Iowa State University education to work for the benefit of Kunar farmers.

"I always knew that I wanted to work with and around growing things," says Pugh ('91 forestry resource management). "I have great enthusiasm for conservation

and managing landscapes so people can make a living and thrive. I can put that enthusiasm to good use here."

Rottinghaus ('03 ag business) enjoys farming and the military. "This deployment gives me the chance to combine these; something I never expected to happen. This is an opportunity to work directly with the Afghanistan people and government to improve the lives of the people," he says.

The Dirt Warriors are fulfilling their purpose through ADT initiatives like improving an orchard irrigation demonstration farm and a row crop demonstration farm. They plan to help Afghan veterinary professionals promote the value of improving animal nutrition. They also will work to improve the quality and volume of agricultural radio programming and facilitate the development of a small provincial poultry industry.

Iowa State faculty and researchers continue to assist the Dirt Warriors by

providing "reach back"—supporting them electronically as questions arise while they're in Afghanistan.

Miller says the trainings and reach back give faculty and staff a chance to go beyond their normal role to serve the state and nation. "They feel honored to have the opportunity to be involved," he says.

With ISU Extension as stateside support, the ADT is replicating extension outreach by providing education and advice. They hope to improve farming methods in an effort to reduce rural poverty and raise farm incomes. As Pugh says, "What better place to make a difference!"

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