

Hard-hit Farmers Receive Timely Boost

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Efforts are underway to restore what was once the world's leading date industry.

The palm orchard of Mohammed Hasan, a date farmer from Karbala, dried up from lack of water after the recent US invasion.

Kalaf Zidan from the north-eastern region of Diala lost his trees when the government failed to provide aerial spraying against pests.

Ali Jawad from the nearby region of Dijail had his date palms uprooted in the 1980s by the former regime, as part of a campaign of collective punishment for the region after some locals tried to assassinate Saddam.

Iraq's once-flourishing date palm groves have been decimated by war, unrest and the collapse of infrastructure under United Nations' sanctions, according to officials and farmers.

But the government's new programme intends to change all of that.

Indeed, Iraq's ministry of agriculture is now pursuing a policy of trying to restore what was once the world's leading date industry.

According to a May 28 press release from the Coalition Provisional Authority, the ministry of agriculture has already established 18 date palm orchards in 13 provinces.

In one year, the nurseries will provide enough offshoots for 2,800 hectares of trees for Iraqi farmers.

Already, ministry officials say, their offices are inundated by would-be farmers asking about fertilisers, vaccinations, pesticides and other topics.

"We will bring Iraq back to first place in the planting of palms," said Hussein Abbas, who sits on the ministry's programme committee.

Abbas underlined the problem, saying that Iraq has just 13 million palm trees today, down from a peak of 33 million in 1958.

While the decline in the numbers began during the late 1950s with the rapid expansion of Baghdad, the steepest drops seems to have come during the Iran-Iraq war, according to ministry of agriculture engineer Sabri Jabbar.

During the fighting, he said, one of the world's largest concentrations of palms - southern Iraq's Ras al-Bisha grove of five million trees - was destroyed completely.

Other trees were destroyed when the former regime drained the marshes of southeast Iraq to root out insurgents.

While yield per tree has tripled since the 1950s, the losses still means that Iraq has not kept pace with production in countries like the United Arab Emirates or Iran.

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