

FAO Saudi Arabia Newsletter

March 2024 – Issue #16



Ministerial Session of NERC37 in Amman, Jordan.

Welcome Note

Ramadan Kareem!

In this issue, we are delighted to highlight some achievements of the ongoing projects under the FAO Technical Cooperation Programme in Saudi Arabia. The progress achieved by the Sustainable Rural Agricultural Development (SRAD) project in agriculture development and natural resources is paving the way for a diverse and productive agricultural landscape. This includes the operationalization of the solar fig-drying tunnel in Jazan to reduce postharvest losses, the adoption of porta-coolers for rose collection in Taif, installation of innovative auction halls for improving seafood handling at Jubail, finalising the planning of Thadiq Geo-Park and the implementation of National Forest Monitoring System in AlBaha. Besides, the two FAO-Saudi Irrigation Organisation (SIO) projects organised several events for increasing water productivity through promotion of efficient irrigation practices. More focus is also on raising awareness about agri-cooperatives and promoting rural women-led entrepreneurs. Partnership and coordination are being enhanced by extending full support for the upcoming COP16 (UNCCD) and engagement of His Excellency Minister of Environment, Water, Agriculture (MEWA) in the FAO Regional Conference for the Near East held in Jordan in March. Enjoy reading!

FAO holds NERC37 in Jordan

The 37th session of the FAO Regional Conference for the Near East (NERC37) had successfully held in Amman Jordan in March. The conference began with the Senior Officers Meeting, where regional priorities and challenges were discussed in depth, and the Ministerial Session focused on accelerating the transformation of agrifood systems while addressing the humanitarian crises in the region. His Excellency Eng. Abdulrahman Abdulmohsen AlFadley, the Minister of the Ministry of Environment, Water, and Agriculture (MEWA) represented Saudi Arabia at the conference¹. During the event, he also had a meeting with the FAO Director General.

Strengthening support for COP16

FAO-SRAD NRM team, in coordination with MEWA, is providing full support to the preparations for the successful organisation of COP16 of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) scheduled to be held in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia from 2 to 13 December. Besides, the United Nations in Saudi Arabia also convened a meeting with

Agriculture Fund to explore avenues for impactful collaboration. The hosting of COP16 in Saudi Arabia underscores the country's leadership commitment to environmental protection at national, regional, and international levels. Notable environmental projects include the Saudi Green Initiative and the Middle East Green Initiative.

Increasing value addition by reducing post-harvest losses



SRAD expert demonstrates the solar tunnel for fig-drying operation.

Value addition is crucial for increasing income and improving livelihoods of smallholders across all SRAD components. During this period, the first solar tunnel for fig-drying was operationalised at a fig farm in Abu Areesh, Jazan, in collaboration with the MEWA branch and Reef. The solar tunnel installation, located at Mr. Ibrahim Abu Sharki's farm, will be made available to nearby fig farmers upon request. In Taif, porta coolers are being demonstrated and utilised by the rose farmers in collaboration with the Taif Rose Cooperative Association. The use of porta cooler technology by rose farmers during the current rose season will help maintain the quality of rose flowers, minimize post-harvest losses and enhance efficiency and effectiveness for rose oil producers. Such innovations in rose flower collection can incentivise and encourage the rose oil producers to accelerate adoption of porta coolers for rose flower collection systematically, reduce losses and lead to increasing rose oil production.

¹ <https://www.fao.org/events/detail/fao-regional-conference-for-the-near-east>.

Strengthening services for increasing livestock productivity



A model herder demonstrates the input adoption in his farm.

In Arar, the SRAD livestock team, in collaboration with MEWA branch is providing livestock advisory services to 15 herders, aligning with Livestock Cluster Development model. Here a field technician is providing advisory services, distributing inputs such as medicines and feeders to the herders and monitoring the herd regularly. The advisory services are ongoing and will require a final assessment, however, the initial evaluation shows a promising outcome. As a result of this intervention, lamb production has increased from 0.74 lambs per ewe to 0.98 lambs per ewe in one reproduction cycle. The vaccination, deworming, and mineral supplementation program, administered directly by the technician, has demonstrated and yielded results in reducing mortality rates (15–20 percent) from the previous levels of 25–35 percent lamb mortality. One of the 15 herders who are receiving the advisory services has been selected to share their experiences with the group, enhancing the adoption of inputs, technical advisory services among herders and improving productivity of small ruminants.

Study on beekeeping baseline and box hive adoption in Saudi Arabia

SRAD bee team conducted a baseline survey of beekeeping in Saudi Arabia and presented the results to MEWA to enhance evidence-based decision support for the beekeeping sector. The survey sampled 454 male and female beekeepers across the country and results reveal that beekeeping provides significant livelihood support and involves a sizable hired workforce due to the labour intensive nature of beekeeping activities. It also found that approximately 83 percent of beekeepers prefer to use local bees and use traditional hives. Modern box hives are more prevalent among younger beekeepers, although they tend to be more dependent on imported bee packages. Nearly 60 percent of cooperative members have adopted box hives, compared to 32 percent of non-cooperative members. These results suggest the need to strengthening the role of cooperatives in promoting new technologies and practices within the sector.

Exploring queen bee rearing as a business opportunity

SRAD Bee team has demonstrated improved queen-rearing techniques and management practices to model beekeepers at three demonstration apiaries for increasing local bee races and this is yielding promising results. At the queen-rearing demonstration apiary, beekeepers are utilizing Miller and Splitting queen-rearing techniques, and it is leading to the production of a greater number of queens. These trained model beekeepers are supporting other beekeepers in adopting the improved queen-rearing techniques and related practices. The next phase will involve using a digital media platform to share the positive outcomes observed at the demonstration apiary with other beekeepers and further enhance the beekeeping sector. Some of the model beekeepers commented that the establishment of demonstration apiaries will enable them to embark on queen-rearing as a business opportunity, provided they receive some initial support.

Skill development of rural women for agribusiness

SRAD is continuing the initiative "Promoting entrepreneurship among rural women to improve their livelihoods in the agricultural sector" with a focus on skill development for rural women. Within the fruit component of this initiative, rural women are being engaged to increase their skills in plant nursery management. The SRAD project team, in collaboration

with MEWA, organized the first session in March for a group of 12 women selected to attend hands-on training for a period of three months covering all aspects relevant for developing plant nursery as an agri-business. A successful local woman who owns a thriving plant nursery business is sharing the techniques for growing seedlings and cuttings, pest and disease control among other skills to the participants. At the inaugural session, participants showed keen interest in improving their skills and determination for establishing their own agribusinesses. In the 3-month training period, SRAD team will deliver comprehensive technical and business management skills and monitor the progress. Empowering rural women with skills unlock new opportunities and enable them access resources for future initiatives

Expanding Agri-Cooperative Societies

SRAD is supporting agri cooperative societies by offering a range of technical advice for developing business models, enhancing productivity, and improving the cooperative management. Recently, the SRAD Cooperative team has launched a weekly broadcast on the Murshedik Alzarea extension platform of MEWA to raise awareness on the benefits of cooperatives. These interactive broadcasting sessions focus on preselected topics is reaching over 200,000 listeners, allowing them to ask questions and receive responses from experts. The program is providing cooperative societies with information on inputs, value-added processing, risk management, and market trends, empowering the cooperative members to take prompt action. In February the Cooperative team also participated in the first Livestock Cooperative Societies forum held at Hafar Al-Batin and made contributed to its resounding success.

Resource assessment for management planning in Thadiq Geo-Park



The minds and muscles behind the great works in Thadiq Geo-Park.

The National Park team with NCVC Department of National Parks led by the head of Saudi Geo-Parks initiative, have collaboratively initiated natural and cultural resource assessments of the Geo-Park in Thadiq Governorate, in Riyadh. This park, spanning approximately 3 221 square kilometers has been nominated for consideration to the UNESCO Global Geo-Park platform. FAO is providing technical support for the development of a management plan that will ensure that effective governance, conservation and sustainable management of the area. These efforts will contribute to the broader goals of safeguarding natural resources in Saudi Arabia, promoting nature-based tourism experiences and enhancing recreational areas for the wellbeing of the local community.

Setting up a National Forest Monitoring System in Al Baha

The Forestry team, in collaboration with NCVC General Directorate of Forests (GDF) and MEWA, have made significant progress in implementing the pilot National Forest Inventory. This pilot project designed and implemented in AlBaha region, incorporates key features to enable a full-fledged National Forest Inventory, including the publication of a Saudi National Forest Inventory Framework, paving the way for establishment of a National Forest Monitoring System. The initiative targets to strengthen the capacity of GDF and other relevant stakeholders in forest inventory planning, implementation, analysis, and reporting by providing technical guidelines, methods, and tools for an effective and cost efficiency national forest inventory. Currently 28 staff are being trained under the project and supporting with equipment, necessary devices and software. Data collection has covered 45 percent of the pilot area.

FAO-SIO-CIHEAM training on irrigation systems planning and design

FAO-SIO project teams conducted a training course in Al Ahsa aimed at strengthening the capacity of technicians and experts from the SIO, and other stakeholders namely Agricultural Development Fund, municipalities, MEWA, and Saudi Coffee Company. This training was organized in partnership with the International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies (CIHEAM), included a theoretical component along with practical applications to enhance trainees' abilities in managing diverse agricultural systems. There were 29 trainees who focused on enhancing technical knowledge and improving skills related to the planning, design, operation, and maintenance of modern irrigation systems. The training concluded with a certificate presentation ceremony.

Workshop at First Regional Conference for Irrigation & Agricultural Drainage in the Middle East 2024

At the First Regional Conference for Irrigation & Agricultural Drainage in the Middle East 2024 held in Riyadh, FAO-SIO projects organized a successful workshop on "Empowering local communities in managing, improving, and distributing irrigation water," attended by many participants. The workshop discussed approaches to integrated water resource management and highlighted the crucial role of local communities and civil society organizations. Engaging discussions were held on modalities for strengthening the institutional framework for empowering local communities in water management, drawing upon successful practices from different Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt and Lebanon. The interactive discussion concluded by emphasizing the significance of institutional support and capacity building to enhance local communities in facing water challenges and scarcity.

Irrigation techniques and good agricultural practices for palm trees



Briefing Session on irrigation techniques and good practices in Madinah

FAO-SIO projects team organized a demonstration farm in Madinah to showcase various techniques and irrigation practices for small farms, aiming to promote water conservation and sustainable resource management. The session, attended by 17 participants from lead farmers of Madinah region, emphasized SIO's vision and the importance of FAO's intervention in the project to drive change and share knowledge among farmers on irrigation system development. Project experts demonstrated the irrigation techniques used in the demonstration field, engaging participants in discussions in selecting suitable techniques and components of the irrigation system based on scientific criteria encompassing engineering, agricultural, and economic considerations. Additionally, the session highlighted best agricultural practices for palm trees, with a focus on the pollination stage essential for enhancing date quality and effectively managing agricultural pests in Madinah farms. The session concluded with a visit to the demonstration farm to observe the techniques employed, and the participants expressed interest in having similar sessions in the future.

FAO ADG and Regional Representative for NENA visits FAO Saudi Arabia



FAO ADG and Regional Representative for NENA had a meeting with FAO Saudi Arabia.

Mr. Abdulhakim Elwaer, FAO Assistant Director-General and Regional Representative for the Near East and North Africa, met with the FAO Saudi Arabia team in Riyadh to provide information on the food distribution system in the Middle East. He highlighted the need to focus on increasing local production and adjusting dietary habits to align with local customs. Elwaer emphasized that the region heavily relies on food imports, which can be disrupted by transportation issues due to conflicts. While MEWA is satisfied with the progress of the FAO Saudi Arabia initiative, they have higher expectations for its success. Mr. Elwaer stressed the importance of conducting a midterm evaluation of the project and emphasized the need for collaborative efforts and dedication from all involved to achieve concrete results and meet stakeholders' expectations.

FAO Technical Cooperation Programme in Saudi Arabia

In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, under the FAO Technical Cooperation Programme, there are three ongoing projects. This includes the multicomponent project on "Strengthening MEWA's Capacity to Implement its Sustainable Rural Agricultural Development (SRAD) Programme (UTF/SAU/051/SAU)" aims to enhance the Ministry of Environment, Water and Agriculture (MEWA)'s ability to implement its Sustainable Rural Agricultural Development Programme (2019–2025). It is being carried out in collaboration with MEWA, Reef, and the National Center for Vegetation Cover Development and Combating Desertification (NCVC). The project comprises nine components, including coffee, beekeeping, roses, sub-tropical fruits, livestock, fisheries, rain-fed cereals, value addition, and natural resources management, which covers forests, national parks, rangelands, and desertification control. Additionally, FAO and the Saudi Irrigation Organization (SIO) are implementing two projects, namely "Promoting Efficient Irrigation and Water Productivity Among Farmers (UTF/SAU/053/SAU)" and "Enhancing National Capacities for Irrigation Management (UTF/SAU/054/SAU)." The overall TCP programme aims to increase agricultural production and productivity, manage natural resources, promote diversification and income generation for smallholders, especially rural youth and women, and enhance capacity for irrigation management by promoting efficient irrigation and water productivity.

Contact information:

FAO Technical Cooperation Programme in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
Email: Fao-sa@fao.org
Website: <https://www.fao.org/countryprofiles/index/en/?iso3=SAU>
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia