

IFAS Initiatives in the Aral Sea Basin

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Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me on behalf of the Executive Committee of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea to express our sincere gratitude to the organizers of the World Water Forum for their hospitality and wonderful work. We appreciate the organization of a special session on the problems of our region and consider it as a sign of a special attention with respect to one of the global ecological problems—the degradation of the Aral Sea as well related social and economical and water management issues. (Slide 1)

As you know, until 1960 the Aral Sea covered an area of about 66,000 square kilometers, with a volume of more than 1,000 billion cubic meters (bcm). Inflow from the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers amounted to about 120 bcm annually with precipitation of about 6 bcm and underground water of about 5 bcm. Annual evaporation from the sea's surface totaled about 63 bcm. With these inflows and outflows, the level of the Aral Sea was stable at about 50-53 meters (m) (Baltic sea system). (Slide 2)

Extensive irrigation schemes developed during 1960-1990 doubled the total irrigated area to about 8 million hectares. Water diverted from the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers increased from 63 bcm to 117 bcm, reducing the inflow to the Aral Sea to only about 9-12 bcm by 1990. Consequently, the Aral Sea's level dropped by about 17 m to its current level of about 36 m, and its surface area was halved by about 50%. (Slide 3)

This large increase in irrigated areas also created serious environmental problems, especially increased salinity of land and water. About one third of all irrigated land is already saline, with yields decreased by a similar percentage. Drinking water of acceptable salinity levels is now also difficult to find in the lower reaches of both rivers. Economic losses of about several million dollars per year are estimated due to increased salinity. In addition, the delta wetlands are threatened by desertification, with severe effects on both human and animal life and on biodiversity.

The livelihood and quality of life of about 4 million people living in the Amu and Syr Darya deltas have also been severely affected. Increased basin-wide soil and water salinity, the disappearance of freshwater lakes and biodiversity, salt storms, desertification, health problems, poor quality drinking water, and loss of fisheries are but a few of the many adverse consequences of past and current water salinity management practices.

Up to 50% of forestry has been lost in upper water reaches and erosion has been increasing constantly and covering more and more areas of the region.

The Heads of the Central Asian countries established the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea in 1993 and approved the final organizational structure of the IFAS on 28 February 1997. They have met several times and made a

number of decisions on current and future tasks of the IFAS. Declarations were adopted in Nukus city (1995), Almaty (1997), Ashgabad (1999), and Dushanbe (2002) on the Aral Sea basin issues.

IFAS' principal task is to attract resources from the five Central Asian countries as well the international community and donor countries to provide financial support for the Aral Sea Basin Program (ASBP). Another major task of IFAS is to inform the international community about the catastrophic situation of the Aral Sea and to seek and consolidate financing for the ASBP from the five Central Asian countries and international organizations. The ASBP chairmanship is rotated among the Heads of the Central Asian countries. During the 10 years since its establishment the Heads of the following countries have chaired the ASBP: Kazakhstan (1994-1996), Uzbekistan (1997-1999), Turkmenistan (1999-2002), and at present the Republic of Tajikistan (2002-2005).

In accordance with the IFAS Regulation, the governments of the region have allocated the following amount of funds from their state budget resources to ASBP: the Republics of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – 0.3%, Kyrgyz Republic and Republic of Tajikistan –0.1%.

These funds are spent on specific projects that focus on rehabilitation of the ecological situation of the Aral Sea Basin. In addition, the countries of the region allocate substantial amounts within the framework of the social and economic development program, health and environment protection, as well as other activities at the local and national levels to prevent negative disasters that will aggravate the Aral Sea crises.

The Aral Sea Basin Program

The principal program objectives of the ASBP are as follows (Slide 4):

- Stabilize the environmental situation of the Aral sea basin
- Rehabilitate the ecologically damaged areas of the Aral sea basin
- Improve the methods of managing the water and land resources of the basin
- Establish program planning and implementation management structures at all levels

Eight project components were included in the ASBP and some of the projects were well developed. These are (Slides 2 and 5)

- 1.1 Regional water management strategies
- 1.2 Providing sustainability of dams and reservoirs
- 2.1 Hydro meteorological services
- 2.2 Regional system of ecological information
- 3.1 Water quality management
- 4.1 Rehabilitation of wetlands
- 4.2 Rehabilitation of the Northern part of the Aral Sea
- 4.3 Project on regulating the Syr Darya water flow and delta development
- 5.1 Freshwater, sanitation and health – Uzbekistan

- 5.2 Freshwater, sanitation and health – Turkmenistan
- 5.3 Freshwater, sanitation and health – Kazakhstan
- 5.4 Medium term water supply
- 6 Integrated water and land management in the upper watershed zones
- 7. Operational water resource management
- 8. Capacity building

In addition to the budget funds that were allocated by the countries of the region, different kinds of grants were awarded by international organizations for US\$47.7 million and US\$278 million, as well as different types of loans. In most cases the grants were used to finance activities for scientific and research purposes.

Water and Environment Resources Management Project

This is the biggest regional project on the Aral Sea, which was implemented with the financial support of the Global Environment Facility (GEF), and Dutch and Swedish governments. The total budget of the project is US\$21.5 million, including US\$9.3 million from GEF, \$4.1 from five Central Asian countries, US\$2.8 million from the Dutch government, and US\$1.4 million from the European Union/Tasis; and US\$1 million from SDC.

The project is made up six components:

- Component A: Water resource and salinity management in Aral Sea Basin
- Component B: Public awareness
- Component C: Dam and water reservoirs safety
- Component D: Transboundary waters monitoring
- Component E: Rehabilitation of wetlands
- Component F: Project management support

Some specific measures have been undertaken under this program and works were accomplished on four components within the framework of pilot projects that will bring down the threatening position of dozens of dams. Measuring equipment was installed in 37 hydrological stations, public awareness activities were improved, and activities were carried out to improve the wetlands, for instance the Sudoche Lake. At present, works are being carried out to wind up and coordinate the main component, in other words to develop a strategy on water use and salinity management at national and regional levels. However, all the accomplished works were not able to impact significantly on the solution of the Aral Sea basin problems and prevent an ecological crisis in the region. As the result, the Heads of the Central Asian states during their Dushanbe meeting on 6 October 2002 assigned new tasks to the Fund agencies to overcome the Aral Sea Basin crises.

Here are some new initiatives taken by the Heads of the Central Asian countries on the Aral Sea basin problems that were discussed by the Heads of States during the Dushanbe Summit at the end of the last year.

First, it must be stressed that the Heads of States approved the “Main directions of the Program on specific actions for improving the ecological and socio-economic situation in the Aral Sea basin for the period of 2003-2010”. The IFAS Executive Committee, jointly with the five Central Asian countries and regional organizations, has begun the development of this program. The main directions were broken down into four components:

1. water management,
2. social and economical,
3. ecological, and
4. environmental monitoring

Preparation of documents and other relevant information on some of these sectors are to be completed in the near future. We are intending to finish the development of the Program by the end of June and then discuss it with the International organizations and donor countries during the Donors’ Meeting that we are planning to hold at the end of June 2003. The final version of the Program will be submitted to the IFAS Board for approval. We expect to receive the Program approval before the Dushanbe International Forum on Freshwater where the Program will be demonstrated to Fund representatives and other participants.

With your permission I will demonstrate these main directions (Slide 7). As can be seen from the slide, the Aral Sea basin program for the period of 2010 begins with the resolution of these fundamental water management issues:

- Development of coordinated mechanisms on water resource management in the Aral Sea Basin (the development and adoption of a package of agreements on the Syr Darya and Amu Darya river basins); and
- Rehabilitation of water supply facilities and improvement of water and land resources.

In addition, the Program includes also other important issues such as (Slide 8):

- setting up environment monitoring;
- mitigation of natural disasters;
- promotion of activities to resolve the social problems of the region;
- strengthening of the material-technical basis as well as the legal basis of the intergovernmental agencies (Slide 9);
- development and implementation of regional and national programs on nature protection in upper watershed areas;
- development and implementation of regional and national programs on rational water consumption by different economic branches of the Central Asian countries;
- development and implementation of the international program on sanitation and ecological rehabilitation of settlements and natural ecosystem of the Aral surroundings;
- development of an international program on the rehabilitation of the ecological sustainability and biological productivity (Slide 10);
- formulation of the sustainable development concept in the Aral sea basin;
- implementation of a regional action program to fight against devastation;

- development of wetlands in the downstream reaches of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers; and
- saline water drainage system improvement.

As you can see, the Aral Sea crisis covers all the environmental issues as well the life activities of the population of the region. Being at the center of the Eurasia continent, the Aral Sea basin problem requires much efforts and resources not only of the Central Asian countries, but also of the international community and donor countries who have been dealing with similar problems throughout the world. The problem is becoming more threatening for the region and if it is not prevented in time it will affect the whole Eurasia continent.

To undertake more active actions on the Aral crisis, the Heads of the Central Asian countries during the Dushanbe Summit emphasized the necessity of establishing a special UN commission that would be responsible for coordinating the activities of international organizations and donor countries focusing on resolving the Aral Sea basin problem. (Slide 11)

The IFAS agencies have initiated negotiations with UN agencies; in particular it is discussing with the UN University for Peace the question of conducting a regional forum to review the proposals on possibilities of including the Aral Sea basin structures into UN organizational system. We hope that by the end of this year all the countries of the region, including Afghanistan, will make their positions clear; official negotiation will then begin with the UN agencies on establishing corresponding structures using the international experience gained in other international river basins.

The 10th anniversary of IFAS is going to be celebrated this year. The President of IFAS, the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, His Excellency Emomali Rakhmonov, has approved a program of organizational events, including the holding of meetings, conferences, humanitarian actions, and even the Aral Sea 2003 Expedition. All IFAS agencies are now involved in the program preparations, but there are still many issues that need the active participation of the international organizations, donor countries, and partners. The Aral 2003 Expedition, which will be conducted from April to August 2003, will assess the real situation in the water management, hydrological, ecological, and socio-economical spheres of the Aral Sea Basin. The outcome of the Expedition will be demonstrated in the Dushanbe Forum on Freshwater.

In addition, in the Dushanbe Forum, plans, programs, and scientific and technological achievements will be demonstrated on the rational use of natural resources and improvement of the social standards of Central Asian countries. An exhibition called "Home of Water" will be held where the countries of the region will demonstrate their achievements to ensure the supply of fresh drinking water and rational consumption of water resources. Representatives of a number of international organizations located in Dushanbe have been assisting in the preparation of this event.

I would like to address international organizations, donor countries, our partners, and all who care about the future of our planet, especially Central Asia where

almost 50 million people face a worsening global problem—the Aral Sea degradation—to help us prevent and alleviate the crises.

The Aral Sea crisis, which was brought about by the unreasonable consumption of water resources, could serve as an example for undertaking specific measures within the framework of the Kyoto World Water Forum and the Dushanbe International Forum on Freshwater, as well as other activities dedicated to the International Year of Freshwater.

The IFAS Executive Committee will do everything possible to improve the socioeconomic and ecological situation of the region, bordering regions, and subregions, especially activities that are being developed or planned during this World Forum and within the framework of the International Year of Freshwater.

In conclusion, I want to wish to all the participants of this Forum success, mutual understanding, and productive cooperation in undertaking specific actions on improving water resources and consumption throughout the world.

Attachments: slides

1. Aral Sea Basin (2 slides)
2. Aral sea degradation (2 slides)
3. ASBP-2 (2 slides)
4. Donors meeting Communiqué (1 slide)
5. ASBP-2 Main directions (3 slides)
6. Dushanbe Declaration (on establishment of UN Commission on the Aral sea basin issues (1 slide)