

Boise National Forest Happenings

April 1, 2011

Unique Assignment

Jim Hoffman recently returned from a year-long detail to Afghanistan working as an Agriculture Advisor for the USDA Foreign Agricultural Service on a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT). He worked on a Forward Operating Base (FOB), essentially a military outpost, in Panjshir Province about 80 miles north of Kabul. The Province is a long narrow valley surrounded by 16,000-foot peaks in the Hindu Kush Mountains and in many ways was similar to Idaho (beautiful but arid).

The overall mission of the PRT was to build upon previous military stability operations and encourage re-establishment of Afghan government services administered by elected officials. Also, reconstruction projects were identified to rebuild an infrastructure damaged or destroyed by 30 years of warfare. Over 85% of the workforce in Panjshir Province is engaged in agricultural pursuits. Jim worked with government officials on a wide variety of reconstruction projects and programs. This included restoring damaged fruit, nut, mulberry, and grain crops, as well as exploring development of new crops such as Kashmir wool collection, fish farming, saffron production, and nurseries for fruit and nut trees as well as conifer and hybrid poplar seedlings for reforestation.

In one case, Jim taught a village how to plant tree seedlings as they wanted a village woodlot for future fuelwood. Nobody in the village remembered how to plant trees as they had lost the local expertise of reforestation knowledge because of years of war and overuse of their forests.

He lived in a small plywood Quonset hut on an 80-person military base. There were three other Forest Service employees working elsewhere in the country and they became close friends. Needless to say, Jim said it was the most unique experience in his life, with lots of challenges but also rewards and many interesting human interest experiences. Describing the detail as like working on a project-level fire at an incident command post, he said "...it was fast paced."

When asked why he chose the Agricultural Advisor detail, he described the catalyst as not wanting to get stale in his career, and a chance to challenge himself with new experiences. In fact, he looks forward to his next career opportunity.

He is the second Boise NF employee to have served in that country as Clark Fleege, Lucky Peak Nursery Manager worked there five times from 2006-2009, providing technical assistance to improve the propagation of native Afghanistan tree species that would be used in various government reforestation projects.

By the way, Jim said there is a continued need for more professionals from all natural resource disciplines in Afghanistan.



Terraced wheat fields in a village



Jim overlooking Panjshir Valley



Home Sweet Home (49 SQ. Ft)



Jim (r) with local extension advisor



A failed experiment... (Left)

Jim inspects a cross-breeding field trial in Afghanistan. The hypothesis proposed to crossbreed marijuana (foreground) with potatoes (background) to produce a complete hallucinogenic drug/snack for medical marijuana users throughout the world. (Yes, this is a joke!)