

Help Iraq to help us

Australia has the brainpower to help Iraq tackle its many agricultural problems. But speed is essential, says PHILIP ELIASON

DESPITE its enormous oil wealth, Iraq is and will be a mixed economy.

It retains a significant rural sector employing 20 to 40 per cent of the labour force.

It has been a valuable market for Australian exports and can be again.

By assisting Iraq's recovery and adoption of a market-based economy, we can maintain grain sales and expand other farm and general exports to it.

When Iraq's oil sector recovers, its increasing wealth will excite demand previously suppressed by wars and sanctions. Iraq has been a food deficit country for 40 years and we are well placed by comparative advantage to supply food and manufactured goods.

Iraq is dry with limited rain-fed cropping. Like Australia, it grows wheat and barley.

Its irrigation areas are more extensive than ours. Iraqis grow irrigated sugar, rice, vegetables, fruit, dates and fodder crops.

They raise sheep and goats on rangelands and have sought to develop intensive dairying.

Like Australia, Iraq suffers from droughts that cut crop production and herd numbers. Like us, they are concerned with animal health.

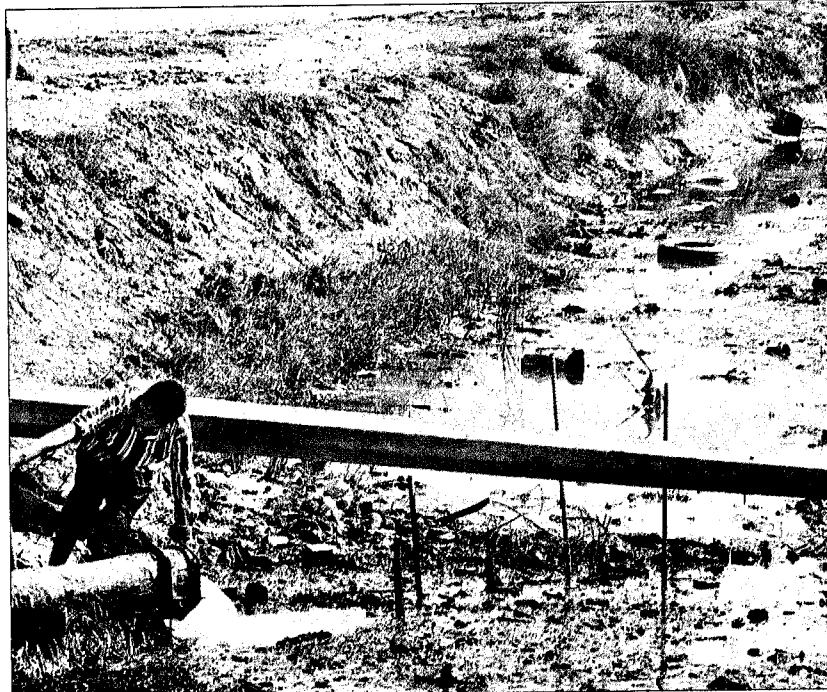
Recent policy problems facing farm experts in Iraq, Jordan and Syria would be recognisable to Australians: there's debate about property rights, drought relief, information services, farm finance and income diversification, land exhaustion and degradation, policy neglect of rangelands and, of course, the ancient and growing scourge of salinity.

A striking feature of 20th century agriculture in Iraq is rollercoaster policy change. Since its increasingly nationalist and statist governments from 1958, agrarian reform has faced ambitious but unsettling and unpredictable directions.

Farming also lost labour to the oil and industrial goods sectors and many workers as casualties in the eight-year war with Iran.

Under UN sanctions, agriculture has continued to collapse both productively, and socially.

Abandonment of agriculture, poverty-based tension in rural areas



Ground up: the task of helping Iraq build its agriculture base is urgent.

and the lack of farmer-based organisations put new risks on this politically important sector.

Post-war "de-Ba'athification" leaves agriculture decapitated. Despite some private and individual effort, farming relied on party and state for direction.

There is no coherent organising force for growers.

There are, however, people who we can and should assist recovery.

The US, a competitor for markets, is using aid to shape agriculture and create sale chances.

Our chances are being limited by the week, despite the more positive impression held by Iraqis of Australia.

Helping Iraqi agriculture will not cut sales prospects. Having strong demand and capacity to pay in a wealthier Iraq is a benefit to us, even more so if it knows our quality and capability.

Iraqi farming must be stabilised and given a firm basis for policy

predictability. This is essential for investment, recovery and increased imports.

To do this, Australia should extend its farm mandate and consider initiatives in an enlarged aid and trade program.

First, help stabilise Iraq's farm sector by giving credible support for farm dialogue in rural areas alongside any new season crop support as planned.

Second, farmers should be helped to create their own grassroots organisations to promote political expression, their policy demands and engagement in national reconstruction.

This will create goodwill and trust, useful commodities in later trade.

Third, we can cultivate productive relations through a structured visitor and training program for future leaders in industry, science and agriculture.

Fourth, Australia can help on resource management issues. We can

help Iraq lift crop value through a clean and green set of farm policies.

Our own advances in living with saline soils will assist Iraq.

Some discussion is happening on how to rebuild Iraq's farm sector. Assisting production and organisation building will create goodwill at a time when support for self-help activity is at a premium.

These points approach profound political and production issues from grassroots, the very level where confidence building and sustainable progress has to be carried out in Iraq.

They also reinforce the work of our government agriculture policy team dealing with Baghdad.

● Philip Eliason worked with the Department of Foreign Affairs before joining the National Farmers Federation, where he was deputy director from 1988-94. He is now a Canberra-based adviser on government affairs.

QUOTABLE

'I don't think it constitutes a fraud, but it is certainly a low act and immoral behaviour.'

Pivot chairman John Watson on private company's grab for Pivot shares, Page 7.

'There has been plenty of other years when rain has come later than this and we've survived.'

Veteran weather watcher Jack Vallance says there is still time to sow crops, Page 10.

'I'm sowing the whole lot to make up for a fairly good loss last year.'

Speed grain grower Trevor Linklater on his plans this year, Page 11.

'It is not customer focused and it is not treating the industry as an integrated force.'

Prominent olive industry figure Simon Field criticises the industry's five-year plan, Page 20.

'They can break us financially, but they can never break our spirit.'

Mal McFarlane after being evicted from the property his family has owned for more than a century, Page 23.

'I was delighted with the decision but the job is only half done.'

Euston farmer Leon Fullert on a Supreme Court ruling against Water Wheel's former directors, Page 26.

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