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USDA volunteers recognized for serving in Afghanistan & Iraq

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In a USDA patio ceremony Friday, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack thanked 32 USDA employees who volunteered to serve as civilian agricultural experts in Afghanistan and Iraq. He also presented a posthumous Iraq service recognition award to the family of former USDA employee Maged Hussein who was killed in 2009 near Fallujah by an improvised explosive device. Hussein was helping reconstruct water infrastructure and develop water resources.

USDA Marketing Specialist Kathie Notoro told *Agri-Pulse* at the ceremony that after serving two one-year tours in Afghanistan in 2004 and 2007, she's signed up for a third tour. On her last stint, she put her skills to work vaccinating and worming livestock. Next time she hopes to help women there set up beehives which she sees as a promising business which women can pursue from the relative safety of their homes. This former Peace Corps volunteer says despite higher levels of violence in Afghanistan, she's convinced that progress is being made in rebuilding the country.

Steve Berk, USDA Farm Service Agency District Director in Florida, told *Agri-Pulse* that Afghanistan is "basically a biblical country" which lacks basic modern services. He explained that a major goal of the U.S. reconstruction effort is to help the Afghan government "build the capacity to run a country." During his year in Afghanistan, Berk worked with local government officials on everything from education to rebuilding irrigation canals and dams. He said in a very dry country which relies heavily on spring runoff, "the overall goal was more irrigation water to raise more wheat to provide that staple so that we could get that area as cereal independent as possible. We needed to decrease the dependence on expensive, low-quality cereals being brought in from other countries."

Addressing the USDA employees who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, Vilsack said "I find myself in the company of heroes." He praised the 32 men and women for having volunteered for extremely tough and dangerous assignments. Merriam Mashatt, a Department of Commerce official serving as Director of the Reconstruction and Stabilization Program, added her thanks. She also explained that volunteers from Commerce, USDA and other "domestic" agencies are vital to the reconstruction mission because "we have the in-house technical expertise, we run the country."

To watch a 19-minute video of the work being done by USDA employees in Afghanistan, go to www.usda.gov/afghanistan for “Paths to Progress,” a documentary showing USDA career employees working on Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT) in Afghanistan. For a 9-minute video on the work in Iraq, go to: <http://www.fas.usda.gov/icd/iraq/iraq.asp>

For information on serving in Afghanistan or Iraq as a civilian volunteer, go to www.usajobs.gov and enter these search terms: “Agricultural Advisor” and “Washington, D.C.”

USDA agricultural experts began serving in Afghanistan and Iraq in 2003. Their goal has been to help Afghanistan and Iraq rebuild their agricultural sectors by planning and implementing reconstruction and agricultural development projects. Projects vary depending on the agricultural needs of the area, but can range from improving food and animal production and marketing systems to veterinary infrastructure, soil and water conservation, and reclamation programs. Experts working with the national government help to build capacity of ministry officials and collaborate with ministry staff to develop long-term strategies for agricultural development.

Currently, 14 USDA agricultural experts are serving in Afghanistan. As of July 1, 2009, 33 USDA agricultural experts are serving in Iraq. In addition, USDA’s Foreign Agricultural Service has stationed Foreign Service Officers in the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, Iraq, since 2003 and will station a Foreign Service Officer to the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan, in the fall of 2009.

The following employees were recognized for their service in Afghanistan: John Mott and Brian Sorenson from Colorado; Kathleen Dobler from Hawaii; Thomas Billak from New York; Bruce Dubee from Virginia; and Steven Berk and Daniel Markus from Washington, D.C.

The following individuals were recognized for their service in Iraq: Dr. John Stephenson from Arkansas; Johnny Gomez and Frank Toupal from Arizona; Joseph Carrigan and Jim Conley from Colorado; Logan Barbee from Florida; Richard Whitten from Georgia; Willie Ruffin from Maryland; David Glenn and Gary Tietz from Michigan; Michael Stevens from Minnesota; David Speidel from Missouri; William Huston and Steven Welker from Ohio; Gregory Kindell from Oklahoma; Joseph Carroll, currently stationed in Islamabad, Pakistan; Daniel Skotnicki from Pennsylvania; Jane Broussard and Dennis Neffendorf from Texas; Jonathan Gressel from Virginia; Dr. Gregory Brooke from Washington; Dr. Jerry Namken from Washington, D.C.; James Bright from West Virginia; and Mark Mitchell and George Stickles from Virginia.