

AAINews

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From An Apple Country

The north region of Balochistan, Pakistan is high in altitude with its capital Quetta being around 1,600 m. In this area, people have been harvesting fruits such as apples, apricots and grapes for many centuries. The land has been irrigated with karez and shallow wells. In particular, apples have become very popular as a profitable cash crop and as a result apple fields have been increasing with the rapid spread of irrigation by wells. However, the area's annual rainfall is limited (between 200 and 300 mm), and the supply of underground water cannot catch up with the use resulting that lowering underground water levels has become a serious issue.

Distinctive and highly interesting features of apple cultivation in Balochistan are the existence of "contractors" and the distribution routes. A contractor is a middle man who has a contract with farmers to buy apples from them and sell the apples in markets. Contractors buy in units of fields when the apple flowers bloom or when the apple trees start bearing fruits. After the contract has been made, the contractor will subsequently do everything from applying fertilizers and pesticides to harvesting. Contracts are usually renewable every year and contractors tend to try to maximize short-term profit without much consideration of the long-term return. Therefore in the long run, this system is not so profitable for farmers. However, they still use the system because it is a lot of work for individual farmer to grow crops as well as manage their shipment to markets. And small scale farmers, in particular, tend to seek easy money. According to a report, around 80% of farmers in the Quetta area sell their apples to contractors. Moreover, it has been pointed out, although without accurate data, the inappropriate use of pesticides and fertilizers may be exerting negative impacts on human health and on the environment in the form, for example, of contamination of soil and underground water.

As for distribution routes, most cultivated apples are at first transported to Karachi and major cities in other provinces such as Lahore. Then depending on demand, they are sent back to Balochistan little by little. This is because Balochistan does not have sufficient capacity of refrigerated storage facilities, and because the markets in Quetta are too small. These are some of the main reasons that allow the continued intervention by contractors.

Major apple varieties grown in the area are red delicious and golden delicious. Other varieties which are suitable for processing juice and jam are also grown. Generally in Pakistan, vegetables and fruits are sold per kilogram regardless of quality differences, but red delicious fetches higher prices than the other varieties of apples. This is an exception. Another exception, of course, is Karachi's high-class super markets where good quality vegetables are sold at high prices.

(Reported by Koto in Quetta)



Apple harvesting



Apples submitted at the Apple Show