

## Agriculture in the Dhofar Region, Oman (4)

### Part 4: Pasturage in the Nejd and the development of modernised agricultural farm zones

In the north of the Jabal region on which we reported in the last issue, there is a vast, barren desert area called Nejd. In this area are found a number of wadis originating in the Jabal region in the south. The plain changes its features from soil desert in the southern part to sand desert in the north, leading further up to the Rub'al Khali Desert of Saudi Arabia. This area has long been used by the nomad Bedouins for raising camels, and there has been date farming in some small oases, but otherwise the area has few inhabitants and it has generally been regarded as being of little use.

However, during the process of resource assessment conducted along with oil exploitation in this region, it was discovered that the Nejd area has abundant water resources, which consequently have started to be exploited and utilized in recent years. Since the first center pivot irrigation system (a sprinkler system with water pipes moving in a circle) was introduced in 1986, some 900 ha of farm land (some temporarily out of use) has been created in the Nejd as of today. In some parts melon and alfalfa are planted, but the major crop of this farming area is Rhodes grass (a gramineous plant that grows as pasture) used as forage for livestock (mainly cattle) in the mountain region and for camels in the Nejd. Today this area serves as an important supplier of cattle forage (which previously used to be imported from northern Oman and Saudi Arabia).

While the Nejd is gaining in importance as a major forage producing area, some problems have been pointed out with regard to the development of the farm land. Although in the early period of the agricultural development, the water resources of this area were thought to be in great abundance, the decline of ground water levels due to intensive water pumping from the ground has become a problem. Some of the farm land where water used to be supplied from wells which pumped up water solely by water pressure, had to be abandoned as water could not be taken from the wells due to lowered water pressure, and in many farms submersible pumps had to be installed deeper to reach the declining water level.

In such circumstances the local government is now being careful about the development of agricultural land in this area, and today construction of new wells or of new farms is, in principle, regulated. In reality, however, there can be seen many pieces of land fenced around and set aside, implying further agricultural development of the area.



**Satellite image of the Nejd area:** The white lines indicate wadis, the central part is soil desert, and the yellow part in the north-west is sand dune.



**Satellite image of farm land in the Nejd desert area:** The red circles are where pasture is grown.



**A wadi flowing from Jabal**



**Melons and pasture grown with the center pivot irrigation system**