

Final Part: The Demonstration Project of Large-Scale Desert Greening by the Japan Petroleum Energy Center(5) - Past progress and behind the scenes -

It's already been one year since we started this series of reports from Saudi Arabia in AAINews Vol.25. During this period the situation surrounding the demonstration project has changed drastically. In the initial plan drawn up in 1996, not even a Saudi counterpart institution had been decided. We did not know whether it would be the Ministry of Environment, the Ministry of Urban and Rural Affairs, the Ministry of Planning or, perhaps, academic institutions. According to this initial plan, the project was supposed to carry out demonstration projects proposed by the Japanese side, solely in Khafji, and the planned greening area was 45hectare. Only towards the end of 1997 did King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology (KACST) officially became the counterpart, and the basic plan which had been made only based on proposals from the Japan side was revised. As a result, without changing the total financial scale, the budget structure was reshuffled in order to incorporate research projects proposed by KACST. Finally in December 1997 the memorandum of agreement on the large-scale demonstration project was signed by both parties. This whole process delayed the actual start of the project by one year and eight months, and in April 1998 part of the research, which had been planned to take place solely in Khafji, was also shifted to KACST's HQ in Riyadh and Muzahimiah research center. With this division of the project between Khafji and Riyadh, the greening-related budget assigned for research in Khafji in the initial plan was reduced by 30%, which went to KACST-initiated research in Riyadh. In addition to this budgeting negotiation which took some time, the land purchase for the project was completed only after the summer of 1998, and construction of necessary facilities started in Khafji only in December 1998. Meanwhile in Riyadh, part of KACST's research farm (Muzahimiah research center) was made

available for this project, but additional construction work for the new research activities was delayed almost half a year. The incorporation of the new local company, Arabia Greening, which was to implement the project, was also delayed significantly. These delays in turn led to a delay in employing staff and procuring the construction materials and equipment. Apart from all these factors, there were other reasons for the delay in progress of the entire project, including: the delay in negotiation over the water supply point in planning the waste water treatment facility in Khafji (late 1998 till autumn 1999) and the delay in negotiations as to whether to use a domestic generator or to rely on the grid - the decision was to use the latter upon KACST's request (January to June 1999), etc. Meanwhile, as a result of the two FY budget negotiations (FY 97 and 98) the budget scale for activities in Khafji was further reduced to 60% of the initial amount due to the relocation of some other research activities to Riyadh. In November 1999 Saudi Arabia issued an official request to extend the project for another three years, but before the Japan side made any official reply the negotiation over concessions between the only foreign oil development company, Arabian Oil Company Ltd., and the government of Saudi Arabia came to a deadlock (November to December 1999). In February 2000 the final attempt was made to move this negotiation forward by Japan's then Minister of International Trade and Industry who visited Saudi Arabia and discussed issues with her Oil Minister, but the negotiation was broken off as Saudi Arabia demanded railway construction in return for the oil concessions. This meant that the oil concessions held in Khafji by Arabian Oil for years were lost finally. As recalled at the time of writing (March 2000), till recently, the issue of early retirement of a large number of Japanese staff as well as the very survival of the company itself were reported by the media. It is now expected that the greening area in the Khafji research farm will end up covering merely one hectare, and the project will be closed with this minimum operation. As of March 2000, construction of the wastewater treatment facility in Khafji has not yet been completed, while the application researches in Riyadh (Muzahimiah research center) are making good progress. Some of the symbiotic microbes cultured there have been separated from the soil and brought back by a researcher of Idemitsu Kohsan Co., and are currently being cultured for multiplication in Japan. However, since the actual operation of the project started only in the second half of 1999, solid progress and results worth reporting to outsiders need to be delayed till further data are accumulated.

There is one person who has followed this project from a broader viewpoint on the Saudi side, namely, the head of KACST's natural resources and environment research center, Dr. Alsali. He has been persistently stressing the importance of training of young researchers and fostering human resource development in Saudi Arabia. Like the saying has it, "creating a country starts from creating people". Not only Saudi Arabia but also other oil producing countries in the Gulf region have developed to assume the features of modern states, leap frogging several centuries from the era of the Bedouin. It is a reality that these countries are having to rely on foreign laborers in order to retain the management of their modern states. Many people may think that KACST is full of talented staff with doctorates from developed countries in the West. However, the harsh reality is that it is staffed with Saudi researchers with little field experience and poor capacity to operate experimental equipment. What is known outside about Saudi Arabia tends to be biased towards oil-related information and her strict religious restrictions. There are only limited opportunities to know more about other aspects of the country such as her history, people and the environment, and outside people including ourselves may be being too hesitant to step forward to get such opportunities. What the people in Saudi Arabia really want was indicated to us by Dr. Alsali, in his rather reproachful email. We would like to end this series "Saudi Arabia News" with his words, which we find unforgettable: "I thought you, only you would stay and work with us for a long long time. But after all you were the same as the others."

