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Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
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Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, I am pleased to come before you today to discuss the incentives, benefits, and support provided to U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) employees who volunteer to serve in combat zones in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Background

Rehabilitating the agricultural sector in Afghanistan and Iraq and USDA's role in assisting these efforts is a critical component to the economic, political, and security environment in both countries. In Afghanistan, 80 percent of the population is involved in farming and herding. In Iraq, agriculture is the second largest contributor to the country's Gross Domestic Product and employs 25 percent of the labor force, making it the largest employer in Iraq.

I want to emphasize how much we appreciate the work of USDA employees who volunteer to serve in Afghanistan and Iraq. USDA employees are serving as Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) agricultural advisors in both countries, as technical advisors in Afghanistan, and as ministry advisors in Iraq. In addition, numerous USDA staff have taken on temporary duty (TDY) assignments in both countries. All of these employees are making substantial sacrifices to apply their skills and expertise to revitalizing these countries' agricultural institutions and rebuilding their agricultural capacity. We strongly believe that in return, we should provide them with the most equitable incentives, benefits, and best possible support we can.

In Afghanistan, more than 37 USDA agricultural advisors have served on PRTs since 2003. In addition, there is one long-term USDA advisor, and multiple TDY technical specialists have provided a variety of short-term technical assistance.

In order to effectively assist, train, and demonstrate techniques to Afghan farmers and agriculture officials, USDA advisors travel in the field as part of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), which consist of military units of 50-100 personnel with 2-3 civilian U.S. Government advisors. Their work has resulted in the installation of windmills in southern Afghanistan to pump water for irrigation and livestock; rehabilitation of a university laboratory for agricultural teaching; stabilization of eroded river banks and irrigation canals; development of post-harvest storage facilities; rehabilitation of degraded orchards; reforestation; and mentoring of provincial directors of agriculture to help them improve their services to farmers.

As early as 2003, USDA deployed staff to Iraq for long-term and short-term assignments. USDA maintains a permanent presence in the U.S. Embassy Baghdad through the assignment of two Foreign Service Officers. Currently, eight USDA staff have

been deployed to serve on PRTs; one staff serves as the PRT liaison in Baghdad; and four USDA staff serve as ministry advisors to the Government of Iraq (GOI). We also have had two employees volunteer for the Department of State (DOS) Global Outreach (GO) Team, and additional staff have conducted short-term TDYs to Iraq.

As part of President Bush's *New Way Forward*, we anticipate an additional 13 USDA agricultural advisors will be assigned to Iraq by the end of this year. In 2008, up to an additional 15 agricultural advisors may be deployed based upon DOS needs. USDA will also replace the existing four ministerial-level advisors and deploy at least two additional ministry advisors.

To improve our ability to respond to overseas challenges and provide the personnel expertise needed will require that we increase our numbers of available, trained, and deployable personnel within our department and others and that we support them with a structure in Washington that conducts planning and coordination. Agriculture is working with interagency partners and the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization at the Department of State to build that capacity and to support development of a "civilian reserve corps" of outside experts that we can also call on to fill additional requirements.

Beginning in September 2007, all USDA long-term advisors in both countries serve on 12-month deployments. They work actively with the Afghan and Iraqi Governments, U.S. military, as well as with other civilians from DOS, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and non-governmental aid organizations, to help harness each country's economic potential by assessing agricultural needs, sharing technical expertise, and developing agricultural projects.

For PRTs, projects in both countries vary depending on the technical needs of the province. Projects have ranged from agricultural extension and natural resources management, to veterinary infrastructure and animal health, to food and animal production and marketing systems. In Afghanistan, two long-term advisors provide technical assistance in areas of veterinary infrastructure development and rural information technology development. Other TDY support is in the areas of sanitary and phytosanitary systems, forestry and natural resources management, extension, and animal health. Ministry advisors to Iraq provide technical guidance in the areas of agricultural extension, sanitary and phytosanitary standards, strategic planning, and soil and water conservation.

Selection /Training Process

In March 2007, former Secretary of Agriculture Mike Johanns reached out to all USDA agencies encouraging them to allow their employees to volunteer for duty as agricultural advisors in Afghanistan and Iraq. As a result, we received over 80 applications: 45 were interviewed; 25 were deemed qualified; and 18 are in various stages of deployment. All are expected to be in Iraq by November 30, 2007. We are recruiting and interviewing for 13 additional PRT candidates for Afghanistan and 15 for Iraq. We expect that all will be deployed no later than March 2008.

Before they are deployed, all long-term USDA volunteer advisors must be medically cleared by DOS and obtain a secret-level security clearance. Concurrently,

USDA PRT liaison officers in country and in Washington work with DOD and DOS counterparts to determine appropriate and individual site placements by matching skill sets of the agricultural advisors with the technical needs of each PRT, making the prospects for success greater.

USDA ensures that all long-term TDY staff fully participate in available security and country study programs as offered by Department of Defense and DOS. Staff going to Afghanistan attend the “Joint U.S. Civilian / Military Afghanistan PRT Training Program” at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. This program covers medical combat life-saving training, force protection training, military – civilian coordination, participation with the Afghan government, and general table-top simulation exercises.

Long-term staff deploying to Iraq are required to attend the Foreign Affairs Counter-Terrorism (FACT) training at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) training center. This two-week training program includes training on personal safety and area studies related to assignment. Specifically, the course instructs participants in the practical skills necessary to recognize, avoid, and respond to potential terrorist threat situations. Participants are trained to conduct surveillance detection, provide emergency medical care, demonstrate improvised explosive device (IED) awareness, demonstrate familiarization with firearms, and perform defensive and counterterrorist driving.

Staff going to either Iraq or Afghanistan receive USDA-specific orientation both in Washington, D.C., and after arriving in-country. In addition, advisors deploying to Iraq participate in the FSI PRT Team Training and Orientation Program. Upon arrival in country, staff are advised by PRT liaison officers, by the U.S. Embassy Regional Security Officer and medical unit and, in Afghanistan, long-term advisors meet with DOD intelligence officers.

All staff are issued and trained in the use of protective body armor including eye, ear, and torso protective gear.

Compensation and Support Services

Once in country, USDA continues to support our long-term staff through site visits, regular conference calls, and regional workshops and training. Recently, the USDA liaison in Iraq arranged for all agriculture advisors in-country to attend a two-day conference in Baghdad where they exchanged technical information with the GOI and U.S. Government partners. Over 50 participants benefited from this professional exchange. An annual workshop is held in Dubai for PRT advisors in Afghanistan to provide additional technical exchange and provide team building support. USDA PRT liaison officers provide additional support on logistical and administrative matters.

Complete medical care and coverage is provided by the Department of Defense or Department of State—whichever is most accessible at the time when care is needed—while a U.S. Government employee is in Afghanistan or Iraq.

DOS and USDA employee assistance programs are available upon request. These programs provide staff an outlet to discuss any personal issues that may arise due to their volunteer assignment.

When it comes to incentives and benefits, USDA follows the model of the DOS Afghanistan and Iraq Service Recognition Packages. These packages outline the variety of special pay and leave incentives available to those serving in these combat zones. In addition, staff participate in USDA headquarters pre-deployment consultations where questions related to salary and benefits can be addressed. Long-term staff receive pay differentials, including danger pay, post differential, and Sunday differential on top of their regular salary. This differential package equates to an additional 75 percent of base salary plus applicable overtime compensation. Additionally, our Foreign Service Officers serving in Iraq receive priority consideration for their next assignment, similar to the practice at DOS and USAID.

USDA's leave package for long-term staff includes the opportunity to return to the United States three times during each 12-month deployment for rest and relaxation and consultations in Washington, D.C. Advisors are also offered the option to take this leave in the region.

Understanding the need for communications back to Washington or home of record, USDA provides each long-term staff with both a satellite phone and cell phone; many equipped with Global Positioning (GPS) units. In the case of an emergency, USDA has provided points of contact to family members and USDA staff for the deployed staff to contact. Also, within country there are protocols for conveying emergency information. USDA has established a web-based portal for sharing information, networking, and exchange of technical resources between long-term staff in each country. Our headquarters staff participate in DOD training activities in Washington and other areas around the country to brief U.S. military personnel on USDA activities in Iraq and Afghanistan so that they have a better understanding of what USDA aims to accomplish and so that DOD can provide additional support when needed.

Conclusion of deployment

Upon their return, all agricultural advisors are given an opportunity to debrief with Washington-based USDA staff. Upon return all staff have full access to the DOS and USDA Employee Assistance Programs. Each volunteer is assured the opportunity to return to the same salary and benefits that he or she had prior to deployment.

Finally, it is with much sadness that I make you aware of the recent death of a USDA Forest Service employee on voluntary assignment with the USDA Foreign Agriculture Service (FAS) in Afghanistan. He was serving on a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) as an agricultural advisor when he lost his life in an explosion that impacted his convoy near Ghazni.

USDA agricultural advisors are providing tremendous assistance to the people of Afghanistan and Iraq as they improve their livelihood and rebuild their agricultural sectors to effectively become engines for economic opportunity and growth. Advisors' work is

challenging, but the rewards to both the advisors and their recipients are great. Our job is to provide all the support we possibly can to these brave men and women and, in cases of emergency, their families.

I want to thank you for allowing me to present the incentives, benefits, and support that USDA provides to its employees who volunteer to serve as agricultural advisors in Iraq and Afghanistan. I look forward to any comments or questions you may have. Thank you.