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## **Irrigation Engineer Pumped Up About Afghanistan Assignment**

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COLLEGE STATION – Dr. Guy Fipps, a Texas Cooperative Extension irrigation specialist, gets pumped up when he's asked about his new assignment.

Even though it is dangerous work, Fipps took a 12-month assignment as the senior water advisor for the Afghanistan Reconstruction Group, moving to Afghanistan in December.

He will help develop water resources, treatment and delivery systems and policies in a country that has been ravished by more than two decades of war, he said. He plans to analyze irrigation needs and determine what is needed to rehabilitate existing systems.

Fipps will be required to live at the American Embassy in Kabul and to travel in armor-plated vehicles. He will also be escorted by armed security guards or by the military at all times when traveling outside of Kabul.

"The way I look at it, it's rare that an opportunity like comes along," he said. "When something like this does come along, you have to do it."

He will help the U.S. government do something it has never done before: develop a model of reconstruction in a war-torn country.

The Marshall Plan – implemented in Europe in the late 1940s and early 1950s – was different from what is happening in Afghanistan now, Fipps said.

"Europe had functioning governments, an educated population, and a lot of infrastructure intact or that could be quickly restored."

Afghanistan has none of that.

And, "It lost a complete generation that fled or died in the 20 years of wars and civil unrest, plus it's an unskilled, uneducated population with 85 percent involved in subsistence agriculture," Fipps said. "Warlords still control much of the country."

The U.S. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Association Web site states, "Water rhymes with survival in Afghanistan."

Afghanistan's climate ranges from arid to semi-arid and has extended periods of drought. Fewer than 20 percent of the households have access to piped-in water, according to the Web site.

But the country – which, land-wise, is slightly smaller than Texas – lacks water managers and the necessary infrastructure to bring water to its nearly 30 million residents in both rural and urban areas, according to The World Factbook Web site.

Fipps will work with the governments of Afghanistan and the United States, private contractors and non-governmental organizations to develop "economically-sound water strategies" that include a national water plan, he said.

Irrigated agriculture in Afghanistan dates back thousands of years, he said. A major irrigation scheme was developed in the southwestern portion of that country in the 1950s, but with the succession of wars it fell into disrepair, he said. Currently, the country depends on traditional hand-dug ditches and flood irrigation.

Fipps said his background makes him well-qualified for the job in Afghanistan. He earned a bachelor's degree in liberal arts from the University of Texas, a bachelor's degree in agricultural engineering from Texas A&M University, and a master's degree and a doctorate in biological and agricultural engineering from North Carolina State University. He began working for the Texas A&M University System in 1988 as an assistant professor and Extension agricultural engineer. He became a full professor in 1999 and was named the director of the Texas A&M System's Irrigation Technology Center in 2003.

Fipps was a wells specialist with the Peace Corps in Upper Volta (Burkina Faso), West Africa from 1975-1977. He served as a technical advisor with Care-International in 1985. As a consultant with Caspian Pipeline Consortium/Oman Oil Co., he analyzed the potential impact of pipeline construction on irrigation systems in South Russia in 1995.

He designed the Guanajuato, Mexico, Irrigation Center in the late 1990s for the Guanajuato Secretary of Agriculture and the University of Guanajuata.

His family's reaction to his new assignment ranged from apprehension to "thinking it's neat," Fipps said. But for the most part, they are "very supportive."

The hardest thing, he said, was packing everything he needed for a year. Even though his embassy apartment is furnished, he still needed to take such common items as sheets, blankets and can openers. And he was advised to take grocery items he might not be able to find in Afghanistan. So, he said, he was sure to pack a little taste of home: tortilla chips and salsa.