By Jan Schultz
The Imperial Republican

It's easy to read into the comments from Eldon Kuntzelman, a Nebraska Army National Guardsman in Afghanistan, that he thoroughly believes in their agribusiness mission there.

Kuntzelman of Imperial is part of the 28th Forward Agribusiness Development Team deployed from Nebraska, which is assisting and educating Afghani farmers on better farming practices.

Part of the team's work will reconstruct as many as 11 grain bins donated last summer to the mission by Imperial-area farmers.

Kuntzelman, in an email sent last month, said the Afghani people have been very receptive to them.

"They have been very open to us and glad that we want to help them with their agriculture needs," he wrote.

But, their work is much more than constructing the grain bins from back home.

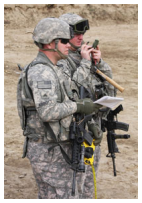
Kuntzelman said among the major ag issues there are electricity, clean water, better seed, fertilizer, better planting techniques, farm equipment, irrigation, water management and more.

Better care of their grape crop is also on the list.

"Afghanistan grows some of the best grapes in this region," he noted.

Consequently, their raisins are some of the best, as well.

He said the Thompson seedless grape that Americans know well, and are now grown in California, came from Afghanistan.



However, the Afghani farmers' crude grape-growing techniques have resulted in big losses in yields.

Kuntzelman wrote that the normal grape farming technique there has the crop on the ground during the growing season, resulting in poor quality and poor yields.

The farmers have been shown by the Guardsmen how to pull the grapes up on to trellises instead.

"Their grapes have seen the benefits," Kuntzelman wrote.

Kuntzelman's wife, Becky, sent him some photos of the trellised grapes the Schilkes are growing at the north edge of Imperial to help the people there visualize how the crop can

survive, even with snowfall here.

When they arrived in Afghanistan last fall, Kuntzelman said it took a couple of months to get organized, meet with farmers and get their vehicles “fully mission capable.” During November, the Nebraska team also helped out a couple other Guard units.

In December, the containers with the dismantled grain bins arrived from the U.S., and in January, the team secured its first location for one of them. A second location for a bin was found in February.

Now, the team is in the process of getting ready to pour the cement pads.

The mission is not just to put the bins up, but also to help teach the farmers the concept of grain storage.

“The idea of bulk storage is something they haven’t heard of,” Kuntzelman said.

Instead, they bag their grain at harvest time. If they can’t grasp the concept of bulk storage, he said they could also stack the bags inside the bins instead. Even that will help cut down on grain damage, he noted.

Other projects the team is involved in include planting fruit and nut trees, working with animal health issues, setting up greenhouses and underground vegetable storage.

Kuntzelman said education and training are major areas of focus.

Oxen are still used there to prepare the ground for planting. All of their seed is sown by hand. Then, they drag the ground to cover up the seed, often leaving it too shallow, too deep, but sometime just right, he said.

“The stand is fair to poor compared to how we plant our crops,” Kuntzelman wrote.

By working with them on different planting times, as well, it’s hoped they can produce better yields.

All of the Nebraska soldiers on this agribusiness mission volunteered, and all have some type of ag background. Kuntzelman is an employee of Lamar Fertilizer. Others on the Nebraska team have experience with livestock, irrigation and crop pest management.

All if it will come in handy as they help the Afghani farmers improve their farming techniques, storage and crop yields.

Afghani people open to soldiers

Kuntzelman said the people there have opened their homes to them, often wanting them to stay and eat with them.

“They always offer food or chi (tea) to us when we come to visit,” he wrote.

Meals usually consist of rice, beans, fruit, homemade bread and “some kind of meat.”

They also make some type of unrefrigerated yogurt, “which doesn’t taste very good,” he said.

Most of the homes in Afghani villages outside of the capital city of Kabul are made of mud.

But, the country is beautiful, Kuntzelman wrote, with its mountains and rugged terrain.

Contact with home

Becky Kuntzelman said she keeps in contact almost daily with her husband via email, and they talk by phone about twice a week.

A new laptop he now has allows him to make the phone calls right from his computer, she said.

While she misses him, Becky said he just loves what he is doing in Afghanistan.

“It’s such a positive mission,” she said, “helping the Afghani people provide better for themselves.”

It’s been very uplifting for Eldon, she said. “It’s important for him to be helping in this way,”

she said.

“I miss him, but I’m behind him.”

Working close by the Guard’s agribusiness team are the U.S. military forces, who are also there for important reasons, Becky noted.

The agribusiness mission “is just another way to help them,” she said.

She expects him to return later this year in August or September.