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New Faces at the Fair

It's safe to say people of all variations can be seen at the State Fair of Texas, but this year the fair hosted a unique group of individuals from across the world. Their objective: to learn about agriculture.

The Norman Borlaug Institute for International Agriculture and Texas A&M AgriLIFE brought 13 Iraqi extension agents to see the fair as part of a six week program called the Iraq Agriculture Extension Revitalization Project.

Project Director Kate Whitney said the group was utterly excited to see the fair, and State Fair hosts could hardly usher the group from barn to barn because they were so eager to take pictures and video different sights, which may seem nothing but ordinary to the common spectator.

"Iraq has been behind in technology for the past 20 years," Whitney said. "This program is designed to give them a vision of something they could do and strive for in the future for their country. The group is soaking up anything we give them, but extension methodology is the main objective. We call it *train the trainer.*"

After the six week period is over, the agents will travel back to Iraq with the knowledge given to them and pass information on to other agents.

Ma'ad Mohammed, Assistant Research Scientist at the Borlaug Institute and translator, said it means a great deal to have his own countrymen here in the U.S.

“These people will be the core of the cell for the extension program in Iraq,” he said.

“They get little sleep because they are constantly exploring, even at odd hours of the night. You can tell how excited they are to be here.”

Mohammed said the group's reaction to the fair, as well as every other aspect of Texas, has been an overwhelming experience for most of them, especially since it is their first time to visit the U.S.

“They keep saying ‘wow, yes, this is amazing. How can we do it? Why don't we have this in Iraq?’” said Mohammed. “They keep thanking me constantly for explaining everything to them.”

“I can paint the picture in their minds, but to see it with their own eyes puts everything into perspective.”

While at the fair, the group toured the beef heifer show, milk parlor, dairy show, cattle barn, goat show, and even visited Boris, the 1,100 pound boar on display near the swine barn.

Plans for the project initiated in 2006 when Texas A&M University was awarded a grant by the USDA. In weeks to follow, the group will undergo dairy training, view different farms, visit the livestock auction in Sonora and Lake Johnson for aquaculture.

Whitney said the groups' overall experience has been interesting so far, and it extends much farther than agriculture.

"It's funny because the questions they ask don't always relate to agriculture. They want to download video from YouTube, crossing the street is different for them here and they take pictures of things we pass by on a day to day basis without notice. They're eyes have been opened to a new type of life," Whitney stated.

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