



United States  
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# USDA Women in Afghanistan: Kathy Gunderman

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**USDA agricultural expert Kathy Gunderman visits a health clinic in Kapisa province.**

In the Tagab district of Afghanistan's Kapisa province, agricultural expert Kathy Gunderman is connecting Afghan fruit growers with local and regional markets, while designing programs to put hundreds of Afghans to work in agriculture.

"The vast majority of Afghans are not insurgents or terrorists," said Gunderman, "but hunger and desperation take away their choices. We civilians are here in partnership with coalition forces to provide Afghans with choices. I am so grateful for this once in a lifetime opportunity."

Gunderman is one of 12 women deployed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) since 2003 to help Afghanistan revitalize its agricultural sector. USDA has deployed 101 agricultural experts in all since 2003. Experts like Gunderman are working with partners from the Government of Afghanistan, U.S. and coalition forces, the Department of State, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and others to strengthen the capacity of the Afghan government, rebuild agricultural markets, and improve management of natural resources.

John Brewer, Administrator for USDA's Foreign Agricultural Service, which oversees the department's efforts, recognizes the work of women like Gunderman as crucial to the nation's progress.

"If we really want to improve the lives of Afghan women at every level of society," said Brewer, "then the cultural realities in Afghanistan require skilled professionals like Kathy Gunderman to work one-on-one with women and women's groups. Experts like Kathy are cultivating leadership in the public and private sectors, helping to increase access to education and health care, and generating jobs for women, especially in agriculture."

In Kapisa, Gunderman is calling upon her nearly 20 years of experience with the U.S. Department of the Interior and USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to help improve harvests in Afghan fruit trees. In the short term, Gunderman has identified conditions in soil management, pruning and irrigation that will increase yields of pomegranates. In the long term, she will work with growers to locate markets for the product in Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and beyond.

Gunderman said the basic methods and tools used by most Afghan farmers remind her of her childhood in northwest Georgia in the United States. Her family, she said, was humble and used mules to plow their fields. They often worked as a family, too, picking cotton by hand in the hot Georgia sun.

For Afghans, agriculture is the main source of income for their nation's economy. Eighty percent of Afghanistan's population is involved in farming, herding or both. In December 2009, the White House noted that the U.S. government's top reconstruction priority is implementing a civilian-military agriculture redevelopment strategy to restore Afghanistan's once vibrant agriculture sector.



**Gunderman arrives in Kabul, Afghanistan, ready to begin her year-long assignment.**

To date, USDA agricultural experts have helped install windmills to pump water for irrigation and livestock, trained veterinarians to detect and treat parasites, refurbished a university's agricultural research laboratory, stabilized eroded river banks and irrigation canals, developed post-harvest storage facilities, established nurseries and reforested areas, rehabilitated degraded orchards, and mentored provincial directors of agriculture.

It has been three months since Gunderman, a Georgia native and Maine resident, arrived in Afghanistan to serve as an agricultural expert on a provincial reconstruction team, and she remains as resolved as ever.

"It has been quite a ride," she said. "I have been in a firefight, my base was rocketed, and I was hit in the head with a rock. With all this, I still feel that we are making a difference. Nothing has happened to shake my commitment to help Afghan farmers."



For more information about USDA's efforts in Afghanistan, please visit [www.usda.gov/afghanistan](http://www.usda.gov/afghanistan).