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## **Tennessee National Guard team to train Afghan farmers**

**By Mark E. Johnson, Assistant Editor**  
*Tennessee Cooperator*  
(Originally titled "Ag for Ammo")

**NASHVILLE** - Late this month, Tennessee will send a National Guard unit composed of 64 citizen-soldiers to Afghanistan for a year-long tour of duty, the same as hundreds of other U.S. military deployments. But the objective of this mission is not to militarily engage the Taliban or chase Osama Bin Laden through the snowy peaks of Tora Bora.

Instead, the 15 core members of the specialized unit, officially the 1-16th Agribusiness Development Team, will be relying on their expertise in agronomy; fruit, vegetable, and livestock production; civil engineering; water management; beekeeping; and other aspects of farming to revitalize agriculture in one of Afghanistan's high mountain provinces.

"Part of the rebuilding concept in Afghanistan involves renovating the economy," says Col. Jim Moore, commander of the unit that is currently training at Fort Atterbury in south central Indiana. "In Iraq, it's different. Their economy is oil-based. But before the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in the late 1970s, the country's economy was 80 percent agriculture. Our mission is to help fill the gap left by an entire generation of Afghans who have been fighting wars for the past 30 years."

The Tennessee contingent is part of a cooperative effort initiated three years ago by the U.S. State Department, says Col. Moore, to improve the local Afghan economy and help stabilize the region. Similar National Guard units from Missouri, Texas, and Nebraska have already served one tour, and Tennessee, Indiana, and Kansas are among states slated to follow. It is a multi-faceted, multi-disciplinary effort.

A Cornersville native and former state FFA president, Col. Moore explains that Afghanistan, roughly the size of Texas, is divided into 34 state-like provinces. The Tennessee unit will operate in Paktya, a high-altitude province bordered on the northeast by Pakistan.

Among the goods and crops traditionally produced in this area are wheat, apples, grapes, almonds, pine nuts, wool, and silk. But 30 years of war have not only interrupted the natural transfer of agricultural knowledge from one generation to the next but have also damaged the country's infrastructure, deforested large tracts of land, and caused severe erosion where small family farms once thrived.

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## Tennessee Guard Training Afghan Farmers -- 2222

The Tennessee National Guard unit plans to train local farmers on techniques ranging from grapevine and apple tree pruning to irrigation. Team member Sgt. Bob Moore (no relation to Col. Moore), an Austin Peay State University agriculture professor, says it's critical that the practices put into place by the unit be sustainable long after the U.S. military has left.

"Our goal is to improve lives for years to come," says Sgt. Moore, whose responsibilities on the team include forage agronomy, apple and grape production, sheep and goat production, and apiculture, or beekeeping. "For example, a successful beekeeping operation may help empower Afghan women. This could provide the mother of a household with money to spend on food and clothes for her family. A typical family there earns \$200 to \$300 per year, and they could conceivably add \$20 to that with income generated by a single beehive. We might make a significant contribution to their annual income and improve pollination in nearby crops, especially apples, which were once their main export. There are several sides to this mission."

Col. Moore explains that it is difficult for most American farmers to imagine the primitive level of agriculture Afghans in the Paktya province are faced with.

"Think the typical American garden before the Great Depression," he says. "The average Afghan plot size is less than half an acre. They broadcast seed by hand. They harvest wheat with an old wooden scythe. They have very few tools and probably no tractors at all. Our goal is to get these folks up to the level of our grandparents back in the 1930s and '40s when they had a milk cow, a few chickens, and a small garden."

In addition to general farming practices, Col. Moore stresses that the agricultural cooperative model, particularly marketing co-ops, will be vital in the long-term success of the mission.

"Only 15 percent of the Paktya population have food security beyond 15 days," he says. "This means 85 percent don't know where Day 16's food is coming from. If we can solve that problem, excess food and products can be sold at a marketplace or bartered for goods and services. What's not needed by that village will move to a larger one, which results in vertical integration. This is where cooperative principles will be critical."

It's very likely, the colonel says, that he and other mission leaders will be contacting Tennessee Farmers Cooperative and member Co-op representatives for help in setting up a cooperative structure during the deployment. "I see the Co-op system as being a facilitator when my guys ask specific questions about setting up a cooperative-type organization that helps with marketing, storage, and other related issues," he says. "We all know that each Co-op is different because they are in different parts of the state. It's the same situation over there because each village will be different. But, as in Tennessee, the farmers will all need a method to sell their goods." The colonel adds that salesmanship comes naturally to Afghan villagers.

"These people have been selling stuff for 3,000 years; they know how to do it," he says with a grin. "They would probably be the smartest penhookers at any Tennessee cattle sale."

Also in the tradition of mid-20th-century American agriculture, the team intends to set up demonstration farms where Afghan villagers can come see the farming techniques in action before utilizing them on their own properties.

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## **Tennessee Guard Training Afghan Farmers -- 3333**

“If we can get a couple of farmers to agree to let us use some of their fields as a demonstration in conjunction with area universities and schools and the property is on a well-traveled road, villagers will be able to see if his or her neighbor is able to make it work,” Col. Moore says.

“We know, for example, that their present method of grape management is to grow them on the ground. Think of the rot involved. So one of the first things we’re going to demonstrate is how to build a simple, two-wire grape trellis that will get the grapes up off the ground and boost production tremendously.”

Stressing that the Paktya province is still an active war zone, Col. Moore says the mission is not without its hazards. Of the 64 members of the unit, each of whom is combat-trained, almost 40 are security forces who will accompany each subgroup on their daily travels.

Despite the obvious risks, Sgt. Mike White, a West Tennessee team member and longtime member of Henderson Chester Farmers Cooperative, is excited to be able to help fellow farmers half a world away.

“It’s a huge responsibility,” says Sgt. White, who row-crops 2,000 acres and grazes “several hundred” head of beef cattle. “We’ve got to be sure that what we’re doing won’t hurt them. The way the Afghans live, if we get them to try something new and it doesn’t work, they might not make it through another winter.” Col. Moore says that’s one of many reasons why team members were carefully handpicked based on their experience and education. Staff Sgt. Donald Novotny, a native of Carroll County, says he was shocked but pleased when the opportunity to join the unit arose.

“After doing a couple of years of active duty in the Army, I decided to join the Guard,” says Sgt. Novotny, who was raised on a row-crop farm near Huntingdon and earned a degree in agronomy from the University of Tennessee at Martin. “When I deployed to Iraq, our missions ranged from patrolling highways looking for hijackers to neutralizing roadside bombs so our people could travel safely.”

“I never dreamed I’d have the opportunity to use my education and farm background to go to one of these war-torn countries and help a guy do his agriculture better,” he continues. “It’s a pretty rewarding type of job.”

“This mission is really what the National Guard is all about,” adds Col. Moore. “We are, literally, citizen-soldiers. We are farmers, engineers, and managers of businesses, and we are bringing that extra knowledge and experience that no one else can provide. And we’re honored to be able to serve our country in this capacity.”

*(NOTE: The Tennessee Cooperator is the membership publication of Tennessee Farmers Cooperative and farmers Co-ops across Tennessee.)*

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**CUTLINES: Family members wave goodbye to Tennessee Guardsmen as they depart Jan. 15 for Camp Atterbury, Indiana, and their ultimate destination, the rugged terrain of Afghanistan.**

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<http://www.tnmilitary.org/PressReleases.htm>