

# Agriculture in United Arab Emirates



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Only about 81,000 hectares (200,000 acres) of land are cultivated. About 24% of cultivated land is used to grow vegetables, 30% fruit, 10% feed crops, and 36% for other uses. The most productive region is Ra's al-Khaimah, which receives underground water supplies from the nearby mountains of Oman and which enjoys the most plentiful rainfall. The main crops are tomatoes, melons, and dates.

The Digdagga Agricultural Trials Station in Ra's al-Khaimah is central to all agricultural research and training efforts in the UAE. Abu Dhabi has two large wheat farms at Al 'Ayn, and experimental farms at Rawaya and Mazaid (near Al 'Ayn) are designed to encourage local Bedouins to take up settled farming.

The Abu Dhabi Arid Land Research Center on Sadiyat Island produces vegetables through special irrigation and hydroponic techniques. In 1999, UAE agriculture produced 1,055,000 tons of vegetables and melons, and 358,000 tons of fruit. Produce includes citrus, mangos, tomatoes, and celery, potatoes, cucumbers, lettuce, melons, peppers, and fodder crops.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries reported a 48% increase in vegetable production between 1992 and 1995. Dates, traditionally grown on oases by nomads, are becoming less important because of vegetable and fruit production. In 1999, the UAE produced 295,000 tons of dates. The UAE currently satisfies about 60% of its domestic fruit and vegetable demand; bans on imports of certain vegetables and government incentives and subsidies are used to encourage domestic production. Roses and chrysanthemums are grown for export to Europe.

### Agriculture, Forestry, and Fishing:

As a result of adverse climatic conditions (nutrient-poor soil, extreme aridity, and high summer temperatures) in the UAE, in 2005 agriculture represented a relatively small portion (an estimated 3 percent) of the country's gross domestic product. Employment in the agricultural sector occupied only approximately 7 percent of the employed population in 2005, but because a relatively high proportion of UAE nationals are employed in farming, the sector receives a disproportionate share of government subsidies at both the federal and local levels. Dates remain the UAE's major crop in terms of area cultivated, but the production of vegetables has increased dramatically, particularly in Abu Dhabi, and currently generates the most revenue. Other major products are eggs, dairy products, and poultry.

Fishing and pearl diving traditionally were an important part of the economy, but the pearl industry collapsed with the development of cultured pearls. Fishing is done almost exclusively for domestic consumption. There is no fish-processing industry in the UAE to provide a market for the 20,000 or more tons of fish caught each year that exceed local demand, and the surplus is either exported or returned to the sea.

### Economy, agriculture and food security

In 2005, the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the United Arab Emirates was US\$129.7 billion (Table 1). The main source of income is the revenue from oil exports. The total economically active population was 2.7 million (59 percent of the total population), of which 86 percent was male and 14 percent female.

Agriculture employed an estimated 4 percent of the labor force and accounted for 2 percent of the country's GDP. The entire labor force working in agriculture is male. For management purposes, the former Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (MAF) (current Ministry of Environment and Water (MOEW)) has divided the area it

covers (i.e. all the Emirates except Abu Dhabi) into three zones or districts as follows: Eastern (Fujayrah and Shariqah), Central (Dubai, Part of Shariqah, Umm Al Qaywayn, Ajman and part of Ras Al Khaymah), and Northern (most of Ras Al Khaymah). This division is not related to the borders of the Emirates or any other administrative partitioning. The total number of farms in the UAE is 38 548 (2003), of which 60 percent in Abu Dhabi, 16 percent in the Central and Eastern zones and the remainder in the Northern zone. Farms produce primarily date palms, fodder and vegetable crops.

The government purchases date production from farmers at a maximum of 70 kg per tree and at a price depending on quality. Fodder production is also purchased by the government but only in the Abu Dhabi Emirate. In the other emirates, fodder is sold in the local market for local consumption or for export to neighboring countries.

The same applies to vegetable crops throughout the country. In each of the three zones it covers, the MAF has a center staffed with engineers and technicians to support farmers. The services to farmers focus on the provision of subsidies, for example for cultivation (free of charge), crop protection (50 percent free with the exception of general campaigns which are totally free), veterinary services and fertilizers (50 percent free).

This system of subsidies does not concern private companies specialized in the intensive production of vegetable crops.

Some extension advisory services are also provided, but they deal mainly with agricultural practices; advisory services for irrigation are actually lacking for several reasons including the fact that the extension staff are not qualified in this area. The number of extension agents is 46, 8, 13 and 13, respectively in Abu Dhabi, the Eastern, the Central and the Northern zones (FAO, 2004). In the UAE, traditional knowledge and traditions are very important.

While creating a modern country, the government aims to conserve the heritage of the past. Today's UAE residents come from different Arabian groups, some of which had a traditional nomadic lifestyle, breeding camels and goats; most of them were settled in the Liwa Oasis to work in simple agriculture and palm plantations. In the coastal area, groups used to work in fishing and pearl hunting.

In the Al Ain Oasis, other groups work in agriculture, especially in date plantations using underground water and aflaj irrigation. In the northern emirates where, relatively, there is more rainfall, people can work in agriculture all year round. In the Hajar Mountains of Al Fujayrah, terrace farming is practiced, while in Dubai, Shariqah & Galfar (Ras Al Khaymah) people are trading with boats and modern ships (MOEW, 2006).

Sources:

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