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SAND STORM NEAR KARATEREN VILLAGE, ISHENBERGER FOR USAID/CENTRAL ASIA

USAID ENVIRONMENTAL RESTORATION OF THE ARAL SEA ACTIVITY FACT SHEET

JOINING EFFORTS TO IMPROVE RESILIENCE FOR THE ARAL SEA ECOSYSTEM AND ITS HUMAN COMMUNITIES

The Aral Sea disaster is one of the world's most notorious environmental problems. Formerly the fourth largest lake in the world, the Aral Sea began shrinking in the 1960s after the rivers that fed it were diverted by Soviet irrigation projects. By 1997, the Aral Sea had shrunk to 10% of its original size and by 2014 satellite images from NASA showed that the eastern basin of the Aral Sea had completely dried up. This region is now known as the Aralkum Desert, the world's newest desert.



DRIED BOTTOM OF THE ARAL SEA. ISHENBERGER FOR USAID/CENTRAL ASIA

The desiccation of the Aral Sea is the result of water extraction from the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers during the Soviet era for irrigation of cotton, wheat, and rice. These unsustainable water management practices transformed the landscape and ecosystem. An overwhelming majority of the dry sea bottom is heavily salinized and polluted with legacy agriculture runoff.

Pursuant to a request from the Government of Kazakhstan, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has launched the Environmental Restoration of the Aral Sea Activity. The goal of the activity is to provide environmental restoration measures to improve the resilience of landscapes in the Northern Aral Sea zone. The implementation of the Environmental Restoration of the Aral Sea Activity supports regional transboundary cooperation for water and environment and enhances resilience to climate change for vulnerable populations and ecosystems.

Forty million people live within the Aral Sea Basin, which extends across the five countries of Central Asia, including the four million people who live in the immediate environs of the lake. In its prime, the region's economy was heavily dependent on the Aral Sea and once included a robust fishing industry. Now, local communities experience sand and dust storms for three months of the year, severely

polluting the environment, and impacting human health.

During the past three decades, restoration of the Aral Sea ecosystem has focused mainly on afforestation of the drained seabed to mitigate the sandstorms that cause erosion and further degrade the fragile soils. The Environmental Restoration of the Aral Sea Activity aims to introduce innovative measures to create an oasis system using saxaul and other plant species in the Northern Aral Sea zone, 50 km from the village of Karateren. The innovative methods – which include a research design to assess the most favorable soil preparation, planting, and watering techniques – will create a stable ecological system with endemic species of flora and fauna.

The primary objective of the Environmental Restoration of the Aral Sea Activity is to improve the soil condition and vegetation in a portion of the dry seabed through afforestation which will support the improvement of the resilience of landscapes and people. The afforestation will help to mitigate the impact of destructive sandstorms on human health and the environment. An additional benefit of the “forest oasis” created will be to increase plant and soil carbon sequestration to help mitigate the effects of climate change.



GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION OF THE “FOREST OASIS”

The Environmental Restoration of the Aral Sea Activity is implemented by the [USAID Regional Water and Vulnerable Environment Activity](#) with assistance from the Executive Directorate of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (ED IFAS) in the Republic of Kazakhstan and in close partnership with the Ministry of Ecology, Geology and Natural Resources of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The Environmental Restoration of the Aral Sea Activity will implement proven methods that enhance the sustainability of results and options for scaling up and replicating those efforts by local communities, governments of the region, and other donors.

IMPLEMENTATION PERIOD:

The Environmental Restoration of the Aral Sea is a three-year activity implemented by the USAID Regional Water and Vulnerable Environment Activity, with a budget of \$1.35 million, from October 2021 to September 2024.

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