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UAE firm set to produce 300,000 tonnes of wheat in Egypt's Toshka

By Maha El Dahan

- * Al Dahra has 100,000 acres of land in Egypt's Toshka
- * Wheat will be for Egyptian consumption, other crops to be exported
- * Egyptian government keen on attracting foreign investment in agriculture



An empty water canal at Sheikh Zayed, near Toshka (Photo: NPR)

ABU DHABI, Oct 27 (Reuters) - UAE-based Al Dahra Agriculture is looking to produce 300,000 tonnes of wheat from an investment in Egypt's southern desert by the year 2016, the vice chairman of the firm said on Monday.

Al Dahra, a privately held Abu Dhabi agricultural firm with farmland across Europe, the Americas and Africa, is already producing around 100,000 tonnes of wheat from a project in the nearby East Owaynat.

"Work on the Toshka project is complete and we are set for cultivation by October 2015, we have plans to get around 300,000 tonnes of wheat from there," Khadim al-Darei told Reuters on the sidelines of an agricultural conference in Abu Dhabi.

Darei said he expected the first harvest from Toshka in May-June 2016 and that all of the company's wheat production would be sold in Egypt.

Al Dahra has 100,000 acres of land in Toshka, a project which aims to pump water from the country's Aswan High Dam reservoir and deliver it via a 50-kilometre (30-mile) canal to reclaimed farmland 60 km from the border with Sudan.

Darei said the investment had initially run into logistical difficulties but that Egypt's new regime headed by President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi was keen on paving the way for more foreign direct investment in the sector.

"The government was not used to such large-scale foreign investments in agriculture but now with the new regime there is a big initiative of support and they are moving in the right direction," Darei said.

Egypt, the world's largest wheat importer, buys around 10 million tonnes of wheat a year from abroad through the state buying agency and private buyers.

The government sells subsidised flat loaves of bread for less than 1 U.S. cent each to millions of Egyptians.

UAE firms invest in agricultural land abroad in deals which usually include a crop-sharing agreement with the host country. Gulf states import more than 80 percent of their food needs.

The Al Dahra project would also produce 100,000 tonnes of potatoes and other crops that will be exported.

"As long as Egypt needs the wheat, it will be for the local market," Darei said.

Abu Dhabi firm Jenaan told Reuters last year it had changed its strategy in Egypt to produce wheat instead of fodder in part on the advice of the government of Abu Dhabi to help fulfil Egypt's needs.

The UAE is helping Egypt build wheat silos to hold 1.5 million tonnes as part of wider plans to boost the country's capacity to 4.5 million tonnes.

The United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia have provided billions of dollars in grants, loans and petroleum products to Egypt since the ouster of Islamist president Mohamed Mursi of the Muslim Brotherhood last year.

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