CONVENER NOTE

First Arab Palm Conference on the Development of Date Palm and Dates Sector in the Arab World

Introduction
The Arab world is the main producer and exporter of dates in the world. Date palms are grown in more than 40 countries, with annual world production of around 7.4 million tons and the Arab world produces approximately 5.4 million tons. In addition to providing fruits and other products, date palm trees also prevent soil erosion and damages caused by sandstorms. The Arab world has more than 84 million date palm trees. Some of the major date palm producing countries are Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria and they face serious problems of poor yield and marketing constraints. Date palm yield has declined over a period of time and almost 28% of the production is lost due to pests and disease. Red palm weevil has become one of the major pests of date palm in many producing countries (Jaradat and Zaid, 2004). Also, inadequate facilities and lack of know-how in date processing and marketing have affected the economies of in these countries. Therefore, rehabilitation of date palm trees in the Arab countries needs collaborative efforts and investment in date palm projects.

Current Dates Production and Limitations
Date palm is an important fruit crop in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and it has more than 23 million date palm trees and over 320 varieties with annual earning of over 0.5 billion USD. The date palm plantations occupy 150,744 ha of land. Although the cultivation of date palms has developed considerably and great attention has been given to date production in Saudi Arabia, the level of date productivity is comparatively low compared with other date producing countries (Al-Obaid, 1996). This is due to many low-yielding cultivars, insufficient offshoots to establish new orchards, high price of new offshoots of good quality cultivars (Al-Sakran and Muneer, 2006), and water scarcity.

The other problems faced by the date palm farmers of Saudi Arabia are pests and a lack of marketing studies. Also, insufficient efforts are being made to adopt new technologies and modern machines to enhance the productivity of the date palm industry for export purposes. The most important pest that infests date palms in Saudi Arabia is the red palm weevil which has spread due to the lack of an efficient integrated pest management practices.

Arab Palm Conference 2011
The first date Arab palm conference, 4-7 December 2011, highlighted the importance of developing the date palm and dates sector in the Arab world, and to determine the role of this sector in supporting the national economies of the region. It was organized by King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology (KACST) in cooperation with the League of Arab Research Institutions, represented by the Date Palm and Dates Research League. KACST is an independent scientific organization and is serving both as the Saudi Arabian national science agency and national laboratories. The science agency function involves science and technology policy-making, data collection, funding of external research, and services, including the patent office and information technology. The Arab League for Palm and Dates sector is a Pan Arab organization dedicated to advancing research and development, growth and sustainability of the date palm and the date industry in the Arab world.

On the first day, the conference was inaugurated by the Minister of Agriculture, Saudi Arabia and the President of KACST, and opening of the Arab world date palm league (RABITAH) as well as inauguration of date palm exhibition. In all 71 oral presentations were made in nine different sessions during the conference. Two parallel sessions were conducted simultaneously. Session A dealt with date palm and dates production, agriculture biotechnology, diseases and pest management, and economics and value addition. Session B covered date palm and dates production, diseases and pest management, post-harvest and storage, and date palm and date processing. Two joint sessions were held: first on ‘Dates loss and opportunities of utilization’ and the second on ‘Developing investment in date palm and dates sector.’ In the poster session, 22 scientific posters were presented. KACST and The Date Palm and Dates League are publishing non-reviewed conference proceedings as a documentary publication containing full papers of all the presentations. Overall, the conference attracted 230 participants from 17 countries.
The conference reviewed many different topics related to date farming, including: tissue culture propagation, methods of improving production, best agricultural practices, integrated pest management, marketing, storage, and capacity building methods, promotion of the date palm and its products towards sustainable development and recent research milestones. During the conference, different issues were also reviewed such as production operations, packaging and marketing, genetic engineering and molecular biology and innovations that could serve the date palm and dates sector internationally.

This conference provided an excellent forum for meeting and networking among the various stakeholders including farmers, investors, scientists, policy-makers, private sector, and marketing managers. An international exhibition was also organized within the conference to feature international and local private sector and scientific organizations. The exhibition showcased the latest technologies, solutions and services for the sector like improved date palm productivity (agricultural operations), harvest and post-harvest operations, secondary products of palm and dates, technology and innovations for palm and dates processing, packaging, marketing and the role of the date and palm sector in supporting Arab national economies.

Executive Recommendations

There is an urgent need to establish a database for the cultivation, harvesting, marketing and manufacture of dates and date products. Improvement is also needed in the main processes of date cultivation such as propagation, offshoots, irrigation, fertilization, pest control, pruning, pollination, fruit thinning and harvesting techniques. In addition an increase in the research capacity in date palm genetics as well as reliable date palm tissue culture for clonal propagation of elite date palm cultivars, multiplication and supply throughout the year are also recommended. A milestone in molecular research on date palm has already been initiated by genome sequencing of Khalas cultivar by the researchers of Qatar Foundation at Weill Cornell Medical College; however more serious efforts are needed to develop this program for genetic improvement of dates in the future. http://qf-research-division.org/news2.php. Date fruit quality, application of programs and standard specifications for dates are highly desirable to improve the quality and economics. Therefore, it is strongly recommended to address major pests and diseases of date palm under the climate change, and germplasm conservation to set up date palm germplasm bank both in vivo and in vitro. There is also a need to support date manufacturing and marketing by establishing new date factories and improving the existing ones. The handling, storage, packaging, and transport of dates should be improved and is of a great importance to date palm sector.

References


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