

(Abstract for Afghan Energy Project presentation, 18 Oct. 2010)

COTTON: AN ALTERNATIVE TO OPIUM POPPY IN CENTRAL HELMAND

Richard B. Scott, Helmand Analyst

Cotton was the major cash crop in double-cropping, cash-cropping central Helmand until the Soviet invasion in 1979. Despite ignoring the history of cotton cultivation in Helmand for the past 9 years, cotton could again become the major cash crop in competition with opium poppy. Since 2002 the international community of donors has shown no interest in Helmand cotton. And within the US embassy, it became as much a political issue as an economics and counter-narcotics issue. I believe that instituting a well planned support program through the long established Bost cotton gin with appropriate monitoring, Central Helmand farmers would again gain confidence in the gin as a reliable institution and market, and in cotton as one alternative to opium poppy. Cotton is a very popular cash crop which the farmers continue to cultivate but at reduced rates.

My discussions with the farmers of central Helmand since 1996 on what would be necessary to get them out of opium poppy cultivation - which they consider an evil crop - consistently reveal their need for price supports at the gin level. We must establish an effective program in support of cotton by the spring planting season next March/April 2011 with informal, low key information to farmers on what is involved, including price to be paid for cotton on delivery to the gin. There are many elements needed to achieve a meaningful program but the need for quick, effective start up action is key. Time is passing. To bolster success we should begin paying the new price for presently maturing cotton when it comes to the gin this fall. These farmers respond quickly to changes in the market. With any crop support program, it is useful to first support crops the farmers know and prefer, that have an established institution for processing, and an established market. Cotton in central Helmand has all these elements.