ICARDA Issues Report on Agricultural Sustainability in West Asia, North Africa

Washington, Oct. 30 -- For thousands of years, farmers have tilled the soil of West Asia and North Africa. Yet after millennia of food self-sufficiency this region is no longer capable of feeding itself, and today imports more food per capita than any other area on Earth. Inexorable market forces are compelling farmers to wrest from the Earth a level of food production it simply cannot sustain. Soil erosion and nutrient exhaustion are becoming ever more common. Scarce water resources are being rapidly depleted. Overgrazing is creating deserts in regions once considered the breadbaskets of ancient Greece and Rome.

A report has been issued in Washington today by the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA), entitled, "Agricultural Sustainability Research at ICARDA," which outlines some of the work being done to develop practical, realistic solutions to these problems. Central to these solutions is an acute awareness that gains in productivity in this generation must be weighed against the land's ability to provide for future generations, in other words, sustainability. The report was presented at International Centers Week, a conference on agricultural research for development.

"The experience of the last three decades has shown that increased crop productivity is only part of the solution to feeding the world," says ICARDA Director General Nasrat R. Fadda, adding an awareness of both the long- and the short-term effects of any given crop or farming practice, is critical for sustained food crop production.

Prior to the introduction of mechanized agriculture, most agricultural systems were by their very nature sustainable. Mechanization, pesticides and chemical fertilizers have enabled farmers to realize amazing yield increases permitting them to continue feeding the World's growing population.
But these innovation also led to a fundamental loss of equilibrium. "Miracle" technolo

gies made it easy for farmers and agricultural researchers to forget the importance of maintaining the fine balance between man's needs and the laws of nature. With growing public concern over global warming, environmental pollution, toxic wastes and genetic erosion, the concept of sustainability has finally begun to receive the attention it deserves.

"Agricultural Sustainability Research at ICARDA" features concrete examples of ICARDA research aimed at limiting soil erosion, restoring range vegetation after years of overgrazing, and increasing the efficiency of water and fertilizer use. What is ICARDA? ICARDA, the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas, was established in 1977 to conduct research on the principal food crops of West Asia and North Africa. As one of the 16 centers under the umbrella of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), ICARDA holds the global responsibility for research on Barley, Faba Bean and Lentil, and the regional responsibility for Chickpea, Wheat and Pasture and Forage Crops. ICARDA also maintains a special program focusing on farm resource management.