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KINGDOM

Response to online survey on organic farming 'huge'

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Saudi Gazette

JEDDAH — Some 2,600 people have responded to the largest ever survey on organic farming so far, according to Marco Hartmann, project director of the Organic Farming Project, an initiative of the Ministry of Agriculture. The project is supported by GIZ International Services.

The online survey was tailor-made to suit a public awareness campaign, Hartmann told Saudi Gazette during an interview. The outcome will be used to build up the activities of the project and promote organic farming.

GIZ International Services, an independent operational department of the "Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit" (GIZ), Germany's leading provider of international cooperation services, has been retained by the Saudi Ministry of Agriculture to establish a functioning and sustainable organic agriculture sector in the Kingdom.

Starting in 2005, GIZ International Services first focused on setting the stage for organic farming in the country, followed by enabling private sector development and shaping the legal organic framework, and is currently facilitating market development and shaping an organic agricultural policy. Among the milestones and achievements are the establishment of a Department of Organic Farming in the Ministry of Agriculture and the launch of the National Organic Logo, which enables consumers to recognize certified organic products.

While initially focusing on health issues — organic products free from pesticides, synthetic fertilizers, sewage sludge, or genetically modified organisms (GMOs) — the Ministry of Agriculture now recognizes the advantage of organic farming in the conservation of water and soil. As a result, the current organic agriculture policy framework includes the promotion of sustainable agriculture.

Currently, water demand for agriculture accounts for almost 90 percent of the overall water consumption, Hartmann said, and over 90 percent of this is nonrenewable water coming from fossil sources.

He said organic farming helps preserve water by improving the water-holding capacity of the soil structure thanks to mulch, leftovers from plants used to cover the soil. This leads to a reduced need for irrigation water.

Organic farming also prevents water pollution resulting from the use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticide, and improved crop rotation and permanent soil cover prevent erosion and soil degradation, hence improving the water-retaining capacity of arable land.

Hartmann credited the success of the organic online survey to the use of social media to promote it. "We organized a small public awareness campaign in 2011, carrying out surveys in supermarkets, but that didn't reach the consumer sufficiently," he said.

Once they realized that the country has a large youth population and avid users of the Internet, they decided to rely on social media instead to increase public awareness, which proved to be successful.

Hartmann was optimistic about the future of organic farming in the Kingdom.

"There are 78 certified organic farmers today, but 280 farmers are currently registered for conversion," he said, adding that the Ministry of Agriculture was also ambitious, aiming for a 5 percent organic market share in the next five years.

The organic agriculture survey can be completed in English or Arabic until Saturday (Aug. 31) by visiting the website of the Saudi Organic Farming Association at www.sofa.org.sa.

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