



USAID ENVIRONMENTAL RESTORATION OF THE ARAL SEA ACTIVITY

FACT SHEET

JOINING EFFORTS TO IMPROVE RESILIENCE FOR THE ARAL SEA ECOSYSTEM AND ITS HUMAN COMMUNITIES

The Aral Sea disaster is one of the world's most notorious environmental problems. Formerly the fourth largest lake in the world, the Aral Sea began shrinking in the 1960s after the rivers that fed it were diverted by Soviet irrigation projects. By 1997, the Aral Sea had shrunk to 10% of its original size and by 2014 satellite images from NASA showed that the eastern basin of the Aral Sea had completely dried up. This region is now known as the Aralkum Desert, the world's newest desert.



THE DRIED BOTTOM OF THE ARAL SEA.

The desiccation of the Aral Sea is the result of water extraction from the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers during the Soviet era for irrigation of cotton, wheat, and rice. These unsustainable water management practices transformed the landscape and devastated the ecosystem. An overwhelming majority of the dry sea bottom is heavily salinized and polluted with legacy agriculture runoff.

At the request of the Government of Kazakhstan, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has launched the Environmental Restoration of the Aral Sea Activity. The goal of the activity is to provide environmental restoration measures to improve the resilience of landscapes in the Northern Aral Sea zone. The implementation of the Environmental Restoration of the Aral Sea Activity supports regional transboundary cooperation for water and environment and enhances resilience to climate change for vulnerable populations and ecosystems.

Forty million people live within the Aral Sea Basin, which extends across the five countries of Central Asia, including the four million people who live in the immediate environs of the lake. In its prime, the

region’s economy was heavily dependent on the Aral Sea and once included a robust fishing industry. Now, local communities experience sand and dust storms for three months of the year, severely polluting the environment and impacting human health.

Over the past three decades, restoration of the Aral Sea ecosystem has focused primarily on afforesting the drained seabed to mitigate the sandstorms that cause erosion and further degrade the ecosystem. The Environmental Restoration of the Aral Sea Activity aims to introduce innovative measures to create an “Oasis” using black saxaul in the Northern Aral Sea zone, 50 km from the village of Karateren. The innovative methods – which include a research design to assess the optimal growth conditions for soil and watering – will create a stable ecological system with endemic species of flora and fauna.

Site work at the Oasis began in 2022. The Activity planted 62,500 black saxaul on 10 five-hectare plots that will be observed under different growing conditions with respect to fencing and treatment with hydrogel, a special substance that helps plants retain water. Another 125,000 seedlings will be planted over the next two years on the remaining 20 plots. The plants will be monitored for four growing seasons to determine best practices to help this shrub flourish, while reducing the harmful sandstorms that plague farming and daily life in the region.



LOCATION OF THE “OASIS”

The Environmental Restoration of the Aral Sea Activity is implemented by the [USAID Regional Water and Vulnerable Environment Activity](#) with assistance from the Executive Directorate of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (ED IFAS) in the Republic of Kazakhstan and in close partnership with the Ministry of Ecology, Geology and Natural Resources of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The Environmental Restoration of the Aral Sea Activity will implement proven methods that enhance the sustainability of results and options for scaling up and replicating those efforts by local communities, governments of the region, and other donors.

IMPLEMENTATION PERIOD:

The Environmental Restoration of the Aral Sea is a three-year activity implemented by the USAID Regional Water and Vulnerable Environment Activity, with a budget of \$1.35 million, from October 2021 to September 2024.

CONTACT:

USAID Central Asia
Gulzada Azhetova
Contracting Officer Representative
gazhetova@usaid.gov