

His Bags Are Packed, He's Ready to Go: Larry Paukert's Adventures in International Consulting

When Larry Paukert got his start in the processing industry more than three decades ago, little did he imagine that one day he'd find himself in Africa helping local farmers operate a Chinese-made oilseed press.

But that's exactly what the former IOMSA president found himself doing last year, as a volunteer consultant sharing his expertise in Malawi, a country sandwiched between Zambia and Mozambique in southeast Africa.

Larry's long road to Malawi began back when he was working as a sales consultant for Prattville, Alabama-based Continental Eagle/IMPCO. His first trip, in 2001, was to Syria, where he helped in the start up of plants in Hama and Aleppo, Syria. Later



The mechanical screw press used to extract oil from groundnuts (peanuts), sunflower seed, and soybeans at the Mitundo Agro Processors plant in Malawi.



An irrigated wheat field in Iraq.

background: A field of maize (white corn), the primary food source for the people of Malawi. Notice the large ant hill in the field.

assignments took Larry to Brazil and Turkey, where he consulted on a biodiesel plant start up in 2004-05.

A new chapter in Larry's career began in August of 2008 when he founded his own company, 3T Veg Oil Consulting, LLC. Through long-standing contacts at Texas A&M, Larry got in touch with the university's Norman Borlaug Institute for International Agriculture. This, in turn, led to his most challenging—and rewarding—assignment: six months in war-torn Iraq, from November 2008 to May 2009, working to get a cottonseed and sunflower processing plant back online.

As part of a 10 person team assembled to help restore the nation's shattered agricultural infrastructure, Larry was quickly able to identify the principal challenges confronting Iraq's oilseed processing industry: a lack of qualified personnel to run the plants, an uncertain flow of raw materials, and unreliable electric power. Compounding all this was Iraq's intense four-year-long drought which crippled all aspects of the ag industry. One particular aggravation Larry had to contend with was the various layers of military and civilian bureaucracy, which he said made "everything seem to take forever." But, on the positive side, Larry noted that the processing plants themselves were "pretty much intact." As a substitute for domestically-sourced cottonseed and

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For more information...

The Norman Borlaug Institute for International Agriculture, named after the 1970 Nobel Peace Prize laureate and father of the green revolution, is part of Texas A&M University, where Dr. Borlaug served as a distinguished professor of international agriculture from 1984 until his death in September of 2009. The institute continues his mission of improving agriculture in poor and developing nations. Its faculty, scientists, and students are involved in over 100 countries around the world to better international agriculture. For more information, visit the Institute's web page, <http://borlaug.tamu.edu/>.

Founded in 1985, CNFA is a Washington, DC-based, non-partisan, not-for-profit organization dedicated to stimulating economic growth around the world by nurturing entrepreneurship, private enterprise and market linkages. Originally the Citizens Network for Foreign Affairs, CNFA empowers people and enterprises in the former Soviet Union, the Caucasus, Central Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and the Near and Middle East. As part of its Farmer-to-Farmer initiative, CNFA assesses the weak links in the flow of crops all the way from production, through processing, marketing and distribution. Projects range from training associated service providers and agribusinesses in financial management, marketing, cooperative development, agricultural production, post-harvest and processing technologies, international quality standards and rural finance. To learn more about CNFA's Farmer-to-Farmer initiative, go to <http://www.cnfa.org/farmertofarmer>.



The Malawi village that produces groundnuts for the processing plant.

sunflower oil, the war had forced Iraq to import palm oil, putting additional strain on the country's economy.

Concerns over security severely limited the team's ability to travel about the countryside. "Basically," Larry says, "we travelled from the military base where we stayed to the various facilities we visited, which were secured before our arrival. There weren't many opportunities for sightseeing. We were also lucky to have good translators, who were locals hired by the U.S. military." Larry did, however, have time to see an olive grove on a farm once owned by one of Saddam Hussein's cousins, the notorious "Chemical Ali," who was executed this past January.

Larry's most recent trip was a three-week stint in Africa, to the nation of Malawi, to be exact. The assignment was part of a Farmer-to-Farmer project conducted by CNFA, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit organization dedicated to empowering people and enterprises in the developing world.

In Malawi, Larry worked with the local operators of two veg oil extraction plants, helping train local farmers on peanut storage, shelling, grinding, roasting, refining, and oil extraction techniques. He also conducted training sessions on roasting and extracting machinery, focusing on important maintenance and safety measures.

The extraction plants were operated by two local farmer-owned coops, who earned most of their profits through the processing of their crops; this is where Larry put his expertise to work.

"They were using a Chinese-made diesel-powered cold press that they weren't operating



A typical scene at a street market in Iraq.

background: An olive grove on a farm that once belonged to "Chemical Ali."



Group picture at an Iraqi farm visit with part of Larry's team and the owners of the farm.

very efficiently. You see a lot of this kind of equipment in Third World countries because it's cheap to buy. The problem is that the manufacturer doesn't provide any training after they make the sale. In this case, the local operators had no real plant training at all."

Larry found those he worked with to be "friendly, receptive, and open to suggestions. They do really well with what they have to work with because they face many obstacles to getting their product to market." They also appreciated that Larry took into account their limited financial resources. "I did not tell them to scrap all their equipment and buy new ones. This seemed to make them more willing to do the things I did recommend," he said.

When asked about his most frustrating experience, Larry is quick to cite an early assignment in Syria. "The folks I worked with just couldn't seem to comprehend what the equipment could do...they were very difficult to train."

On the other hand, Larry says his most satisfying experience was a month-long assignment in India, where he found people willing and eager to learn. "Many of the big U.S. firms are there, but are working with local partners. The technology is almost as good as here, but in many respects, India is still very much a developing country."

While Larry enjoys the challenges and rewarding experiences that come with his international consulting work, there are some drawbacks. "I do miss my family. In Iraq, we had email and Skype, so that helped a lot. But in the more underdeveloped countries you can be pretty much cut off from the outside world."



An interior view of one of Saddam Hussein's many palaces.

For those interested in international consulting, Larry offers this advice: "Speak slowly and plainly. The pace is not what we are used to here, so you must adjust to that. But above all, be patient."

And where is Larry off to next? A 3T consulting assignment has taken him to Brazil, where he assisted with the start up of a 600 ton per day cottonseed oil mill plant. His next assignment will be back to India to continue his work with processors there.