

“Afghanistan, the third biggest producer of Cashmere in the World”

Narrator: Afghanistan is a country where more than 80% of the population earns their living in the agriculture and livestock sector. But, unfortunately, this sector has remained as traditional as it was a thousand years ago. Illiteracy, lack of foreign investors' interest, and decades of war had stopped the development of this sector. But, fortunately, after the establishment of the new government of Afghanistan in 2001, and with the help of the United States of America, various organizations have started activities in the agricultural and industrial fields through different programs.

The Accelerating Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP) is one of the programs conducted under the framework of the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock. This project, which is funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), has paid serious attention to the cashmere wool, and has changed this traditional Afghan profession to a large industry with international standards in a short time.

[Rolling text: The US Agency for International Development (USAID) is an agency of the United States Government in charge of implementing and funding reconstruction and development programs in countries such as Afghanistan, which are funded by the American taxpayers.]

Today, Afghanistan is the third biggest producer of cashmere wool in the world. The aid of the people of the United States of America provided opportunities for the development of this industry through different programs, such as: training programs for goat herders, construction of a large factory for the production of cashmere wool in Hirat province, introduction of Afghanistan's cashmere in international markets, and attracting the attention of buyers to Afghanistan's cashmere.

The local term for cashmere is “Kurkh”. It is under the hair of special goats called “Kurkhgoats”. Cashmere keeps the goats warm. How this wool is being turned into cashmere and how it keeps humans warm is what we would like to show in this documentary.

Susanne E. Jalbert, Development Outreach and Communications Officer, USAID, US Consulate, Herat: A very important thing is the establishment of the National Cashmere Association. And this will help tremendously in getting out the word that the Cashmere here in these provinces are high quality, it will help to improve sales, and it will help to improve the exportability of the products.

Basir Hotak, Head of the Cashmere Production Factory in Hirat Province: The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has taken two very important steps to support the cashmere sector. First, USAID, over the last two or three years through its ASAP project, published a study report entitled “Cashmere Value Chain

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Analysis – Afghanistan”. This report was very helpful to introduce Afghanistan’s cashmere and to attract the attention of international donors and organizations. Second, USAID supported our factory in Hirat in buying the first line of cashmere de-hairing machines.

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Narrator: This is one of the big cattle markets for cashmere goats.

Interviewer: Do you use the cashmere, or have you ever sold it?

A cattle seller in Hirat Province: Yes, we do. We remove the wool when the goats are alive, then we bring it to the city and sell it to shopkeepers. There are two types of wool: the first one is of better quality, we remove it during the summer; we remove the second one from the skin of the goats when they have died. But the first type of wool, from live goats, is more expensive than the second one.

A cattle seller in Hirat Province: This goat has two types of wools which are very expensive. The wool of this goat goes off very easily, and it is cheap. See, this one does not have wool. This one and this one have two types of wool.

Narrator: Here, the wools are removed by hand. Then other people buy the wool from Haji Sarwar, and deliver it to the cashmere production company.

Haji Sarwar, a wool trader in Hirat Province: At the beginning of the summer, we gather the wool from the goatherds. With our 50 to 60 employees, we remove the wool. Depending on our capacity, we clean more than 5 to 6 tons of wool. Then the traders come and buy it from us.

Female worker: Between the morning and the evening, I remove less than 2 KGs of wool. It is very difficult and requires a lot of time.

Jan Agha, a wool trader in Hirat Province: The cashmere products come from the goats. Shopkeepers buy 5 to 10 KGs of the wool that is gathered by the goatherds from the nearest villages and districts of Hirat. And then we buy 1 to 10 tons of wool from the shopkeepers and deliver it to the factory for further processing. It is then exported to China.

Narrator: In order to decrease the amount of dirt, the wool is brought here for an initial air pressure cleaning. The wool is then brought to the washing machine, which cleans it following different steps. During the last step, a special washing product is added: it is

of good quality and kills all microbes. Then, the wool is brought to the open air to dry. Here is another machine which uses a special wetting agent that changes the wool to cashmere.

Basir Hotak, Head of the Cashmere Production Factory in Hirat Province: This is the de-hairing workshop. In this area, the machines separate the wool from the hair. It starts from feeder and then comes to the preparing machine. The preparing machine is a complicated machine: it is made of 11 rollers, and it removes most of the hair from the wool. Since the wool has a lot of hair, in order to make the job of the separating machines easier, we dedicated this job to the shedding machine.

After going through the preparing machine, the wool goes through the separating machine. Its two sections remove more than 80% of the hair. When the amount of hair decreases and only 20% of the hair is left, it becomes more complicated to separate it from the wool and cannot be done by one machine. Therefore, we have installed three machines here only to remove the rest of the hair from the wool. After going through the preparing and the separating machines, the wool with the last 20% of hair comes to these four machines for further cleaning. This cashmere is 100% free from hair and ready for international market.

The only problem with this cashmere is that it becomes smaller after going through the preparing machine. I was in contact with the old industrialists of Hirat province for the past two days to solve this problem. Fortunately, we were able to produce a shawl as a test from this cashmere with the handmade fiber, which had positive results. One of the shawl samples was shown at the last exhibition in Hirat. People were ready to buy the shawl for 20,000 AFS. We did not sell it because it was a sample. Our expectations are that we should produce thousands of thousands of such shawls from this cashmere and deliver them to the Afghan markets.

Narrator: This factory has the capacity to produce Qaraqul¹ hats and it also produces excellent leather.

Basir Hotak, Head of the Cashmere Production Factory in Hirat Province: At the beginning of this year, we decided that we would introduce where needed the high quality raw material of Qaraqul leather to the international markets. Since modern and standard machines are not available in Afghanistan to process the Qaraqul, Afghanistan's Qaraqul does not receive the desired attention. People in the North, in Mazar and in Khulm, still use the hundred year old traditional way of producing Qaraqul: they only use salt and barley flour, and then export the Qaraqul, which becomes smelly when it

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qaraqul>

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arrives to far-away countries. Therefore, we want to do a service to the Qaraqul of Afghanistan.

We have prepared a standard formula to process Qaraqul, which comes from Italy. The only problem that we still have is that it is a bit difficult to find four kinds of processing liquids. The leather is ready now, but it still needs to be softer than this, which we have not been able to do. We are very hopeful to find the liquids in the next two to three months. As soon as we find the liquids, we will be able to produce and export Qaraqul hats of international standards.

We have also set up a cashmere testing laboratory. These are very precise microscopes: 1 / 23,000 and 1 / 25,000. In this laboratory, we test five important characteristics of cashmere. The first one is the diameter of the cashmere fiber. The second one is the length of the cashmere fiber that we process and export to bazaars. The third one is the quantity of remaining hair in cashmere. The fourth one is the percentage of remaining fat. And the last one is the level of dampness.

Mohammad Arif “Abdullah”, Deputy Field Program Officer of USAID in Hirat Province: More than 75% of the Afghan population earns their living in the agriculture and livestock sector, especially in the Western Region. The cashmere that the Afghan people used to gather was not properly processed. The cashmere used to be cleaned and processed in Pakistan, before being exported to other countries. A cashmere processing factory was the most important need of the Hirat population. It is Mr. Hotak who had the idea of building a cashmere cleaning and processing factory in Hirat province. He asked USAID and the Agriculture Directorate of Hirat to help him in this regard. Fortunately, with the help of USAID and the Agriculture Directorate, he now produces high quality cashmere in line with international standards. He even obtained an official certificate to export cashmere worldwide. Furthermore, the cashmere was approved by international laboratories in the United States of America and other countries.

Susanne E. Jalbert, Development Outreach and Communications Officer, USAID, US Consulate, Herat: This is a stellar example of private business and of the government working together. It's also a great model for both local and international businesses. And it shows how everything has been merged together: the government of the province of Herat; USAID, with their inputs into improving both the Cashmere industry and the agriculture industry as a whole; we have the inputs from the Belgians; and we have the inputs from the local people living here – they are very excited about improving this important industry.

[Rolling-text: Music for this documentary film was selected from an on-going research and documentation project on traditional Afghan music conducted under the auspice of the Aga

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Khan Music Initiative, for which Aga Khan Trust for Culture received support from the Embassy of United States of America and the Royal Norwegian Embassy.]

Narrator: Finally, we found that with the support from the American people, we now have one of the most profitable industries in the country, which can fulfill thousands of new hopes for our people.