



U.S. Embassy Astana

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Index

I. Hub Highlights

Hub Office Reopened
WaterTech Conference
Int'l Fund for Saving the Aral Sea
Muynak and the Aral Sea Graveyard
Cairo ESTOC Conference
CA Presidents Sign Water Accord
Tashkent Renewable Energy Conf
UN Trans-boundary Water Conf

II. Other News

OSCE Envir. and Water Conference
Global Environment Issues Speech
EU-CA Envir and Water Conference

III. Regional News Clips

Financial Crisis => CA Integration
EBRD Loans for Energy Efficiency

IV. Upcoming Events

Tajikistan "School-in-a-Box"

I. Hub Highlights

Central Asian Hub Office Reopened

The Central Asian Environmental Hub Office officially reopened on September 15 in Astana, Kazakhstan -- the first day on the job for the new Regional Environmental Officer (REO), Bruce Hudspeth. The Hub was previously in Tashkent, but was closed down in January 2007, because of events in Uzbekistan. Now, almost two years later, we are proud to be back in action! Environmental Specialist Bakhtiyor Mukhamadiev continues to maintain the Tashkent office and we are now operating as if there are two Hub offices and two regional representatives, thereby giving us a greater range of operation in this vast region.

WaterTech Conference

On his very first day of work, the REO and Environmental Project Assistant Marzhan Srymova flew to Almaty, Kazakhstan, to attend the WaterTech Conference, the First International Central Asian Forum on water and water technologies, September 16-17. All Central Asian countries sent representatives and Kazakhstan and Israel co-hosted the Conference. Scientists were able to exchange ideas and experiences as well as explore and promote advanced environmentally-friendly technologies in the sphere of industrial and municipal water services.

WaterTech Exhibition

At the same time as the WaterTech Conference, the WaterTech Central Asia 2008 Exposition took place, from

September 16-18, in Almaty. The Atakent International Exhibition Centre Pavilion featured exhibitions from 40 companies, including those from the Czech Republic, France, Germany, India, Israel, Italy, Kazakhstan, the Netherlands, Poland, and Russia. Israel companies dominated the group, with seven separate exhibitions. As they told the REO, they are optimistic that they can secure a number of lucrative sales and contracts while they are in Kazakhstan, based on their rich experience in irrigation and water technology in an arid climate.

International Fund for Saving The Aral Sea

REO and Bakhtiyor Mukhamadiev, along with Embassy Tashkent ESTH Officer Robert McCutcheon, visited the Tashkent Office (Uzbekistan) of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS), and met with Office Head Usman Buranov, who insisted that the question of regional water management is exclusively political and is inextricably linked to the question of energy. He complained that international organizations worked against each other and duplicated each others' work in Central Asia. We also traveled to Nukus, the capital of Uzbekistan's Karakalpakstan Autonomous Region, an impoverished region and the most hard-hit because of the desiccation of the Aral Sea. We met with the local IFAS Branch Director, Ubbiniyaz Ashirbekov, who outlined the main goals of IFAS in Karakalpakstan: restore the Amu-Darya River delta system; plant trees and shrubs in the Aral Sea dry sea bed to reduce dust storms; give micro loans to help local people find a livelihood; provide sanitary potable water; and improve local health conditions.

Karakalpakstan and the Once Mighty, Now Dwindling, AmuDarya River

The REO, Bakhtiyor Mukhamadiev, Embassy Tashkent PolEcon Officer Steven Prohaska, and the Uzbekistan Desk Officer Brian Roraff traveled to Nukus and Muynak in Uzbekistan's impoverished Autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan, the region that has suffered the most from the desiccation of the Aral Sea. We met with the local IFAS representative in Nukus, the region's capital city, who presented a positive face on the organization's efforts to undo the damage to the Aral Sea. We also met with the local Central Committee Deputy Chairman, who was already looking forward to the money his region would get from oil and gas exploration in the Aral Sea dry seabed - the new desert Aral-Kum. We took an interesting car trip to Muynak, formerly a port on the Aral Sea, now a struggling town with little to offer except the ship graveyard on the desert floor that used to be the Aral Sea.



As you can see, in October of this year, the AmuDarya has dwindled to a small rivulet with barely any motion by the time it reaches the town of Muynak at the far end.

Muynak and the Aral Sea Ship Graveyard



This scene is well known. This is Muynak. The sea bed of the receding Aral Sea is now a desert floor, the newly emerged desert called **Aral-Kum**. Muynak's fishing community has been devastated. Now, residents of Muynak have to learn other professions, leave the area for better jobs, or simply struggle to get by. Lying as it does along both the Aral Sea and the AmuDarya River delta, Karakalpakstan (Nukus, Muynak) is one of the areas worst affected by the environmentally unsound agriculture of the Soviet period. Much of Karakalpakstan's farmland has become heavily salinized because of over-irrigation and salt dust from the exposed bed of the receding Aral Sea. In addition, high concentrations of toxic agrochemicals (fertilizers, defoliants, insecticides) in soils and river water pose hazards to human health in many localities. The shrinkage of the Aral Sea eliminated the republic's fisheries and resulted in a harsher climate and a shorter growing season.

Chilpyk Kala, An Ancient Zoroastrian Ruin

On our journey back to Nukus, we stopped to visit Chilpyk Kala, a Zoroastrian circular sand "fortress" with an ancient history dating back to 200 AD. The state religion of pre-Islamic Khorezm was Zoroastrianism, which believed that bodies of deceased persons should be placed in a raised location, known as a **dakhma**, or "tower of silence," exposed to the elements until the bones had been cleansed. It is here at Chilpyk that Zoroastrian priests exposed the corpses of Khorezm's ruling dynasty to the open air to decompose.



Itinerant Uzbek Musician

An itinerant Uzbek musician appeared out of nowhere in the middle of the desert and sang local folk songs to us. It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience.



Cairo ESTOC Conference

The REO, Bakhtiyor Mukhamadiev, and Marzhan Srymova flew to Cairo, Egypt, to attend the October 7-9 Middle East, South and Central Asia Environment, Science, Technology, and Health (ESTH) Officers Conference (ESTHOC). The conference brought together representatives from a number of U.S. embassies in the Middle East, South, and Central Asia, as well as officials from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Department of State (DOS), the Department of Interior (DOI), and the Department of Agriculture (USDA). The overwhelming consensus was that this multi-regional meeting helped us better understand the common problems we all face, the resources at our disposal, and the important role we play in helping to create a positive U.S. image through science (public) diplomacy. We also established lasting friendships and relationships that will help us better do our jobs.

Central Asian Leaders Reach Agreement on Water and Energy For This Winter

The presidents of the five Central Asian states overcame their disagreements and signed an agreement on October 10 in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, to share water and energy resources this winter. If implemented, the agreement should improve the winter situation in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

According to the agreement:

- Kazakhstan will supply Kyrgyzstan the coal it needs for the winter period.
- Uzbekistan will guarantee an uninterrupted supply of natural gas to Kyrgyzstan during the first quarter of 2009, an amount that will exceed by 150 million cubic meters the amount delivered in the first quarter of 2008.
- Tajikistan and Uzbekistan agreed on the transit of approximately 1.3 billion kilowatt hours of electricity from Turkmenistan through the Uzbekistan electrical power grid.

These agreements are directed toward maintaining the level of water in Kyrgyzstan's reservoirs necessary to guarantee the demands of neighboring countries for water for the irrigation period (i.e., the 2009 crop season).

Renewable Energy Conference in Tashkent

The Carnegie Institute, Uzbekistan's Foundation for Regional Policy (FRP), and the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Institute (CAREC), jointly co-sponsored the November 10-12 Renewable Energy in Central Asia Conference in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, focusing on the link between energy and food security. Uzbekistan President Islom Karimov has declared food security to be Uzbekistan's most important problem. U.S. Ambassador Richard Norland said that renewable energy, food security, and the environment are not only important issues for the region and for Uzbekistan, but they can also represent opportunities to enhance the U.S.-Uzbekistan relationship. The United States is deeply interested in these questions and is actively preparing for the next stage of talks on climate change, even as it prepares for a new presidential administration.

UN Trans-boundary Water Conference

The UN Trans-boundary Water Conference took place in Almaty, Kazakhstan, on November 17-18. The key element of the Conference was the presentation of a water management project developed by the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ) and that is an integral part of the European Union's (EU) Central Asia Strategy. The International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS) Executive Committee (EC) also officially inaugurated a new permanent office in Almaty. UN Assistant Secretary General Udovicki referred to the "compound crisis" of food, water, and energy security, and said UNDP can help make national water management frameworks more sustainable, help countries capture the benefits of renewable energy and carbon finance, and help countries respond to the threats posed by uranium tailings.

II. Other News

Kazakhstan

Asia Development Bank Sponsoring Project to Develop Regional Cooperation in Water Resource Management

October 27, 2008. The Asia Development Bank (ADB) designated almost \$1 million to promote the development of regional cooperation in water resource management. Australia, Austria, and Norway donated the funds under the auspices of the ADB Water Financing Partnership Facility. This initiative will include the Amudarya and Syrdarya River Basin regions as well as Talas and Chu River Basins. ADB Senior Specialist said the absence of regional initiatives on water resources is a major threat to economic integration and growth in Central Asia.

International Scientists Conference

During the International Scientists' Conference in Almaty, Kazakhstan, on November 21, REO gave a speech (on behalf of OES/STC [Michael Schena](#)) on science and technology agreements. The Conference organizers were delighted to have a U.S. Embassy representative participate, and this was an excellent opportunity to do "science" diplomacy.

Kyrgyzstan

Ministry of Emergency Situations

REO and [Bakhtiyor Mukhamadiev](#) met with the Ministry of Emergency Situations in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, on October 15. Daurbek Sakyev, Head of the Department of Prognosis and Monitoring, said that uranium tailings in Kyrgyzstan are a risk, not only to Kyrgyzstan, but to all of Central Asia. Tailings can seep into rivers and underground water supplies, threatening not only today's population but future generations as well. He asked that the international

community pay more attention to this issue and help Kyrgyzstan (and Central Asia) solve this problem "collegially." Current tailing locations are vulnerable to earthquakes, floods, rock slides, and avalanches. There is also the additional risk of land degradation because of snow melting and water runoff. Earthquakes can cause the ground water to rise to the surface, becoming contaminated in the process. Forest fires can also spread this toxic poison into the atmosphere as radioactive ash. In addition major transportation routes pass through these contaminated areas. He urgently requested support in the form of grants, investment, and technical assistance to help rehabilitate the ageing storage facilities for the tailings. The Ministry has a well-equipped crisis center funded by the World Bank that allows the Ministry to monitor crisis situations and communicate directly to the field.

Lake Issykul Biopreserve

REO and Bakhtiyor Mukhamadiev visited Kyrgyzstan's Lake Issykul Biopreserve on October 16. This biopreserve is unique in Central Asia, and is the first such park to be set up. Other Central Asian republics are in the process of creating similar biopreserves. It has set aside 43,000 square kilometers along the lakeside and is addressing the problems of land degradation and overgrazing of pasture land. Now in the fourth phase, there is a project to put solar energy for heating and electricity. It also includes a pensioner's home that local villagers will build themselves. They have set up an ecological information center that students and visitors can visit to better understand local environmental conditions, including endangered species. It is difficult for them to develop ecotourism or to incorporate the biopreserve as part of a national park system because Kyrgyzstan at present has no legal structures to allow for this. The deputy director of the preserve hopes the biopreserve can spread to other regions in Kyrgyzstan. They were very eager to have U.S. experts come to Lake Issykul and share their experiences.

Turkmenistan

EU-Central Asia Environment and Water Resources Conference

The EU-Central Asia Environment and Water Resources Conference took place in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, on December 3, 2008, to discuss cooperation in preserving the environment and water resources. There were three different forums: the EU-Central Asia Conference; the 12th meeting of the EU Water Initiative; and the 52nd meeting of the Interstate Coordination Water Commission (ICWC). Turkmenistan President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov sent a congratulatory message to the participants.

Uzbekistan

OSCE Environmental Security and Water Management Conference

Tashkent Embassy ESTH Officer Robert McCutcheon and Bakhtiyor Mukhamadiev attended a workshop from October 23-25 in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, organized by the Scientific Information Center of the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination (SIC ICWC), the OSCE Project Coordinator in Uzbekistan, and the Coordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities. The workshop aimed to improve trans-boundary water management and promote

environmental security in Central Asia. More than 50 water professionals from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan offered a number of recommendations for Central Asian governments, the OSCE and other international organizations in the areas of integrated water resource management, legal regulations of trans-boundary waters, and the development of economic mechanisms of water use.

Presentation at Uzbekistan's Fulbright Association Alumni Roundtable in Tashkent

Tashkent Embassy ESTH Officer Robert McCutcheon and Bakhtiyor Mukhamadiev delivered a presentation on global environmental issues at a November 28 roundtable organized by the Fulbright Alumni Association of Uzbekistan. Participants of the roundtable included the Fulbright alumni group, students from the Tashkent University of Oriental Studies and representatives of NGOs. The presentation focused on issues related to climate change, desertification, biodiversity, and water problems. It also described what the United States is currently doing to address these four global environmental problems both domestically and worldwide. In addition, the presentation included information on the Central Asia Regional Environmental Hub in Astana.

Tashkent hosts WMO Regional Association II (Asia) 14th Session

On December 5-11, Tashkent hosted the 14th Session of Regional Association II (Asia) of the World Meteorological Organization (WMO). The session, held every four years, reviews the WMO activities carried out during the last four years and discusses issues related to weather, climate and water in the region, including the strategic plan and future working mechanism. More than 150 representatives from 35 members of Regional Association II (Asia) of the WMO and observers from other WMO member states and international organizations attended the seven-day session. William Bolhofer and Frederick Branski from U.S. National Weather Service represented the United States. Members unanimously elected Victor Chub (Uzbekistan) as President and Qamar-uz-Zaman Chaudhry (Pakistan) as Vice-President to serve for the next intersessional period.

III. Regional News Clips

Note: Bakhtiyor Mukhamadiev's excellent **Weekly Central Asian ESTH News**, sent from our Tashkent office, contains most of the news events that are happening in the region. This section modestly supplements his reporting.

International Clean Energy Meeting

Pugus, Tajikistan. October 22, 2008. The "International Clean Energy Meeting" was held at the Presidential dacha in Pugus, Tajikistan, with representatives from the European Union, embassies, and Tajik economics and environmental officials. The meeting included a presentation on Tajikistan's potential to develop hydroelectric power, and also discussions on international environmental law. The meeting also addressed Tajikistan's future obligations under the Kyoto treaty (ratification is expected soon), and the possibility of establishing a "cap

and trade” mechanism for emissions in Tajikistan. In the opinion of U.S. Embassy officials who attended, this was yet another forum for the government to reinforce its commitment to large scale hydro power projects and to seek investment for those projects.

First Apartment Building with Solar Electricity and Heating to Be Built In Khujand This Year

Khujand, Tajikistan. October 24, 2008. Asia-Plus. The first of nine five-story apartment buildings provided with solar electricity and heating systems will have been put in commission in Khujand, Sughd province by the end of this year. Construction of the first three apartment buildings began last April. The installed solar electricity and heating supply systems will provide the apartment buildings with electrical power and heat in case of there is a shortage of centralized electricity. The entire residential complex should be finished by the end of next year.

Kazakh Leader Attends Opening Ceremonies of Two Medical Centers

Shymkent/Astana, Kazakhstan. November 6. Interfax-Kazakhstan. Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev attended ceremonies to commission a blood centre and a center for sterilization of medical equipment in Shymkent (the administrative center of South Kazakhstan). "Taking care of people's health is one of our main priorities. The fact is that a blood center and a center for sterilization of medical equipment have been built here, and these are the only ones not only in Kazakhstan but also in the rest of the CIS," Nursultan Nazarbayev said while visiting the medical centers.

Financial meltdown may trigger integration in Central Asia

Astana, Kazakhstan. November 7. Interfax-Kazakhstan. The recessionary trends in the world economy could become a catalytic agent for integration processes in Central Asia, according to Kazakhstan's Risk Assessment Group Director Dosym Satpaev. "Due to the world crisis, every country in Central Asia is experiencing serious problems that vary greatly from state to state. He thinks the most reasonable way of integration in Central Asian is a water and energy consortium. "The rational use of water and energy resources is the hot-button issue for all states in the region, and negligence of this issue could be crucial for every state," Satpaev said. "If the countries work out coordinating principles within the water consortium, it could build a good foundation for further efficient cooperation." Satpaev believes that the resistance of "a ruling power" in each Central Asian state hinders this integration, because each state sees consolidation as a threat to its sovereignty. He believes that integration is necessary for ensuring regional security and promoting integration of the region into the world community. "A unified economic area consolidating 55 million people is much more appealing and significant on the world arena," the expert said.

New Preserve in Kazakhstan, Funded by Germany

Ust-Kamenogorsk, Kazakhstan. December 8, 2008. Interfax-Kazakhstan. The German Government announced its intention to give two million euros (about 2.6 million USD) to

Kazakhstan for the creation of a new bio-preserve in the Altay-Sayansk ecological region, in Eastern Kazakhstan . If all goes as planned, the new park should be completed in 2010.

EBRD launches 75 million dollar loan for energy efficiency investments

Astana, Kazakhstan. December 11. Interfax-Kazakhstan. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) will extend a \$75 million loan for energy efficiency and renewable energy investments. The financing will be provided to industrial enterprises through local partner banks. The second important component is technical assistance to support local partner banks to market the loan and to assist companies in the identification of energy loss areas and propose technical solutions for lowering energy consumption. The maximum loan amount for a single borrower amounts to \$7 million. The EBRD is the largest single investor in Kazakhstan outside the oil and gas sector with a total project portfolio of more than \$5 billion. The Bank is investing across all sectors of the economy and particularly focusing its efforts on supporting sustainable energy development in Kazakhstan.

IV. Upcoming Events

Tajikistan, Uzbekistan: School-in-a-Box

The Carnegie Institute is planning to install a prefabricated school powered by solar energy in a remote village in Tajikistan. This same project was supposed to be completed in Uzbekistan this past November, but logistical problems have delayed it until later. Carnegie originally anticipated a January completion date for this Tajik project, but logistical and transportation complications now make February a more likely date. REO and Bakhtiyor Mukhamadiev are planning to attend.
