



Ethiopia Visit Provides a **LIFE CHANGING EXPERIENCE** *for Utah Farm Boy*

By David Bailey – Vice-President – Organization,
Utah Farm Bureau Federation



“Life Changing” are the words that I finally settled on when describing to others my recent experience in Ethiopia. Other than those two words, it’s been difficult to put into vocabulary what I saw and learned on the two-week excursion to one of the poorest countries in the world.

Eighteen months ago a friend of mine approached me about traveling to Ethiopia with him to visit a large farm and some local Ethiopian farmers. Excited at first, I quickly agreed. Little did I then know what impact that offer, and decision to go, would have on my life today. The humanitarian trip was originally scheduled for May 2010, but a political election and the subsequent unrest made it too dangerous to travel at that time. Fast-forward to May 2011 and I found myself with five others in our group landing at

the Bole International airport in Addis Ababa, the Capitol of Ethiopia. The plane ride itself took me through two other countries including Amsterdam, Netherlands and Khartoum, Sudan and required over 20 hours flying time in a cramped airplane seat.

Our main mission was to travel 16 hours southeast of the capital to the Bali region near a town called Beltu to deliver supplies and help assess the challenges of farming in Ethiopia. We traveled in a pickup truck loaded with supplies to a large 25,000-acre farm where we would be staying for several days called the Alyssa Farm. The Alyssa Farm is operated by Morrell Agro Industries (MAI), an agricultural company based in the U.S. The farm project was started more than two years ago in partnership with Utah State University to develop drought resistant wheat and barley

seed that can withstand the subtropical highland Ethiopian climate. The farm provides nearly 300 Ethiopians with full-time and seasonal jobs. They also have anywhere from three to five American managers on site full-time.

Ideally the farm owners hope the Alyssa Farm will be a showcase and test farm where local farmers can learn modern farming techniques and practices and have access to the most advanced seed, fertilizer and weed control products. They also hope to develop more varieties of seed that can be used to bolster wheat and barley yields in the area.

“The Alyssa Farm can afford to take the risks in experimenting with new crops and seed varieties in this area,” said Paul Morrell, Owner and President of MAI. “One of the main problems Ethiopian farmers face is that if they venture to take

risks and change how they have farmed for the last 5000 years, they end up risking the lives of their children and themselves in the process.”

Ethiopian Farmers simply have a very low risk tolerance because of the extreme poverty that exists in their country. They have little technical support compared to the wealth of support American farmers have with the infrastructure of experiment farms, extension services and land-grant universities. American farmers also have major seed and chemical companies like Monsanto, Pioneer and Syngenta that have scientists and agronomists as well as the most up-to-date research and test facilities that aids in being the worldwide leader in agriculture.

The Alyssa Farm has 9,300 acres under production currently, but they hope to clear more of the surrounding high desert land in the upcoming years. The area receives around

9-to-15 inches of rainfall per year and sits at 4,800 feet above sea level, which is similar to many of the dry farm areas in Northern Utah. Ethiopia is located just a few hundred miles north of the equator so temperatures stay relatively constant throughout the year. There are typically two growing seasons throughout the year with both a wet and dry season. It wasn't uncommon to see a herd of camels or a batch of white-faced monkeys out and about, along with scores of villagers spread out across the vast landscape that makes up most of Ethiopia. From a high point the views were spectacular and varied from high desert to very subtropical.

We also traveled through another area with great contrasts. This area sees more than 200 inches of rainfall per year and has rolling hills and abundant banana trees. The beauty was truly breathtaking.

At the time I visited the Alyssa Farm some of the wheat had just began to break through the soil and other fields were up about three or four inches. The virgin soil was doing its best to support the imported seed but something still seemed to be hindering the growth. Last year's crop mostly failed due to drought conditions, and a soil disease looks to be challenging this year's crop in other ways.

The farm is still a work in progress but I have no doubt the challenges will be overcome. It was evident to me from the hope that I saw in those who were working here that God has had a hand in getting this farm up and running in this part of the world. It was clear that what I was witnessing in the middle of Ethiopia, with farmers learning how to better feed their fellow man, was nothing less than a miracle.

We were able to help the farm establish an on-



farm first aid and health clinic with the supplies we had brought along with us. We also visited with some of the medical staff in the clinics from surrounding villages to assess the level of health care available to the farm workers. The standard of just about everything is much different than what we are used to here in America. The clinics we saw were usually government-built but were very dirty, run down and lacked many of the basic medical supplies.

En route to the farm, we made a visit to a non-operational medical clinic that had recently been shut down by the government. We collected as many of the useable medical supplies as possible to take to the Alyssa Farm. We also made visits to a few other operating clinics to meet with their staff to get an idea of the level of health care they were capable of. All

along the way I was in awe of the beautiful landscape, which was a stark contrast to the extreme poverty. The most shocking element about Ethiopia was the quantity and extensiveness of the poverty. I expected to see poor conditions but nothing prepared me for how it infiltrated nearly every nook and cranny of the country.

Ethiopia is a wonderful place full of beautiful people who want to learn, but lack the freedom and know-how about how to improve their circumstances. The land is beautiful and full of natural resources that could help them be self-sustaining if only they had the knowledge and resources to do it. Morrell Agro Industries aims to really make a difference in Ethiopia by teaching the people “how to fish” and its motto — sowing hope and prosperity — is found on all of its vehicles.

I can't express enough the needs that exist in Ethiopia. I am deeply impressed with the good work that is being done by companies such as MAI. I am grateful I was able to help in some small way and I plan to find other ways to help make a difference in the future. I'm just a small-town farm boy from Utah, but even I can find ways to help make a difference. My experience in Ethiopia truly changed my worldview and altered the way I count my blessings here in America. We live in a very blessed nation, accurately described as the land of “milk and honey”. My time in Africa showed me the need to continue to work diligently at protecting our American farmers' and ranchers' abilities to produce abundant, affordable, reliable and safe food supply — the foundation of our great nation. 