

UN agriculture agency warns of water scarcity in North Africa and Near East

9 March 2017 – Accessible fresh water in North Africa and the Middle East has fallen by two-thirds over the past 40 years, posing a huge challenge requiring “an urgent and massive response,” the head of the United Nations agriculture agency said today.

Access to water is a fundamental need for food security, human health and agriculture, and sustainable water use for agriculture requires transforming food systems and diets, said Jose Graziano da Silva, the Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), in a news release on his visit to Egypt.

Per capita availability of fresh water in the region is now 10 times less than the world average, he said, underscoring the need for a significant overhaul of farming systems.

A recent FAO study showed that higher temperatures may shorten growing seasons in the region by 18 days and reduce agricultural yields a further 27 per cent to 55 per cent less by the end of this century.

The rising sea level in the Nile Delta is exposing Egypt to the danger of losing substantial parts of the most productive agriculture land due to salinization.

Moreover, “competition between water-usage sectors will only intensify in the future between agriculture, energy, industrial production and household needs,” he said.

Mr. Graziano da Silva attended a high-level meeting on FAO’s collaboration with Egypt on the ‘1.5 million feddan initiative,’ the Government’s plan to reclaim eventually up to two million hectares of desert land for agricultural and other uses.

Policy advice and best practice ideas on the governance of irrigation schemes is a key offering in FAO’s Near East and North Africa Water Scarcity Initiative, backed now by a network of more than 30 national and international organizations.

The initiative has gained momentum, buoyed by its endorsement by the League of Arab States as well as donor support, Mr. Graziano da Silva said, noting that urgent actions supporting it include measures aimed at reducing food loss and waste and bolstering the resilience of smallholders and family farmers.