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In deepest Helmand, the price differential between wheat and dried opium this season is playing into the hands of the government and heavily against the Taliban. Wheat commands roughly twice the world price here, about \$200 per ton against just under \$95 on the grain floors of Chicago and Winnipeg. The price of opium has crashed : from about \$225 a kilo two and a half years ago, you are now lucky to get more than \$90 a kilo in Kandahar. The problem is hyper-production - there is two years worth of opium harvest now in store. Besides, it's getting hellishly problematical to sell the stuff and just plain hellish to grow it. It costs roughly \$70 for hired labour to thin a jerib (one fifth of a hectare) of poppy ; \$30 for the first go round and \$40 the second time, and \$300 a jerib to harvest.

Then there are the risks and overheads, paying the middlemen, the warlords and gangsters and the Taliban tax. A further risk is Governor Ghulab Mangal's habit of ordering in his taskforce of 100 armoured tractors protected by ISAAF (NATO's International Security Assistance Force) and Afghan army units which tear up fields just as the poppies are ready to cut and tap.

No wonder hundreds of farmers in Marjah gave two fingers to the Taliban at a recent Shura, telling their so called "protectors" they needed to buy subsidised wheat seed and fertiliser from the government. The Taliban reluctantly agreed because they know that otherwise the farmers face ruin. (Editor's note : tales returning with 19 Light Brigade tell of Taliban killing farmers and burning seeds and tractors to prevent them from taking the governemnt help, so this is a good indicator of progress and success in agricultural policies which are vital to secure the countryside and its future)

The farmers are now getting expert advice in the unlikely form of an NGO called Rift Valley Agriculture, whose members are a gang of Zimbabweans whose farms were taken off them by Mugabes's war veterans gangs. Their leader, Roy Watson, is a Giant Haystacks figure. A huge, silver-handled Colt automatic sticks out of his black XXX-Large body armour vest.

Roy and his oppo Farney Feirera are the Little and Large of the team. They are the supreme practitioners of Extreme Agriculture, going into the fields with the farmers, in the badlands of Marjah and beyond the belts of IEDs at Musa Qala, to advise on crop husbandry, harvest and planting cycles, the application of fertilizer and herbicide. "They learn quickly, and are pretty damn good" Roy the Man Mountain says. "Wheat yields have gone up 30% in one year."

For more on Rift Valley Agriculture see <http://www.riftvalley.net.au/>

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