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| Implementing Agency | World Bank |
| Region | Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) |
| Focal Area | International Waters |
| Project Title | Water and Environmental Management in the Aral Sea Basin |
| GEF Allocation | US\$12.725 million |
| Cofinancing | US\$9.0 million US\$1,400,000 (European Union/TACIS) US\$4,100,000 (five Central Asian representatives) US\$3,200,000 (Government of Netherlands) US\$300,000 (Swedish International Development Agency) |
| Total Financing | US\$21.725 million |
| Dates | June 1998–June 2003 |
| Environmental Problem | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Severe environmental damage to the Aral Sea water catchment from years of unsustainable irrigation, creating difficult economic conditions for human populations |
| Project Goals | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve and expand monitoring and information on region's environmental problems • Develop and implement regional and national strategies and agreements addressing situation |

The Aral Sea Basin is considered a disaster zone by many. Demands on the watershed for irrigation and other purposes have overdrawn water resources. By 1991 almost all river water was being diverted for irrigation and the sea had lost half its area. What flowed in was salt-laden, gradually killing most fish. Wetlands dried up in river deltas. Game, birds, and other wildlife have become rarer. Windstorms carrying sand and dried salt into the air have increased in frequency and severity.

The impact on local communities and economies has been severe, bringing widespread unemployment and poverty as fisheries, game habitat, pastures, and agricultural land have lost productivity. Public water supplies have become unreliable and unsafe due to bacterial contamination. The high incidence of other diseases has led to speculation on environmental causes. Land upstream of the lake has been damaged from excess water withdrawals, leading to flooding and salinization of the land. If trends continue, most agricultural land in these river basins will be unfit for agriculture within a few decades.

Governments in the region recognize that the causes of these problems are a policy framework that treats environmental goods and services as free goods, a deficient infrastructure in the water sector, and lack of regional coordination on both problems. They have acknowledged the need for a sustainable development strategy but have responded differently to this challenge. These countries require substantial financial support to ensure their capacity to address the basin's problems and stay on a course toward sustainable development.

The Project This project will be implemented by the restructured Interstate Fund for the Aral Sea (IFAS), whose capabilities have been built through a number of grants from other donors. The project will address the causes of overuse

and pollution in the Aral Sea Basin and support the sustainable management and future development of its natural resources by implementing the first stage of a regional strategic action plan. This project constitutes only the first step to addressing the root causes of the Aral Sea Basin crisis

- Activities**
- Develop and implement regional and national water management strategies and agreements
 - Assess water quality problems, especially salinity, and develop strategies to improve water quality
 - Expand and upgrade monitoring and regional data bases on water quantity, dynamics, and quality, and enhance a regional information system to support decisionmaking
 - Restore selected remaining Aral Sea wetlands
 - Support public education on the nature and extent of the problems to engage the public in addressing them.
- Benefits**
- Preserve biodiversity of international importance and habitat for globally threatened bird and fish species
 - Protect one of the last remaining wetlands in the former Amu Darya system
 - Test an efficient and innovative way of combating desertification by creating a wetland buffer zone.
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The Global Environment Facility (GEF) is a financial mechanism that provides grants and concessional funds to developing countries for projects and activities designed to protect the global environment. GEF resources address climate change, biological diversity, international waters, and depletion of the ozone layer. Activities concerning land degradation, primarily desertification and deforestation as they relate to the four focal areas, are also eligible for funding.

GEF is a joint venture of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and the World Bank. These three agencies implement GEF projects.

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