

Business English

World water shortages growing 20 years ahead of predictions

von Fiona Harvey (London)

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A third of the world's population is suffering from a shortage of water, raising the prospect of "water crises" in countries such as China, India and the US. Scientists had forecast in 2000 that one in three would face water shortages by 2025, but water experts have been shocked to find that this threshold has already been crossed.

About a quarter of the world's population lives in areas of "physical water shortage", where natural forces, over-use and poor agricultural practices have led to falling groundwater levels and rivers drying up. But a further 1bn people face "economic water shortages", because they lack the necessary infrastructure to take water from rivers and aquifers.

David Molden, co-ordinator of the report by the International Water Management Institute, said: "If we continue to manage water in the way we do now, there will be more problems with scarcity."

He said agricultural practices could easily be improved to reduce the wastage of water. Farming uses up 70 times more water than is used for domestic purposes such as cooking and washing. In Thailand, the amount of water used to grow food is about 2,800 litres per person per day. In Italy, about 3,300 litres are required to produce each person's food every day.

Shortages of water are already biting in countries such as Egypt, which imports more than half of its food because it lacks enough water to grow more. In Australia, there is a water shortage in the Murray-Darling basin because so much has been diverted for use in agriculture.

In the United States, there are increasingly heated disputes with Mexico over the sinking levels of the Colorado river.

Water shortages are compounded by corruption, according to Transparency International. David Nussbaum, chief executive, said between 20 and 40 per cent of total investment in the water sector "does not flow to the people who should be getting the clean water and sanitation".

He said big water projects, such as the construction of water networks and treatment facilities, were subject to corruption on a grand scale, but that petty corruption was also common - for instance people paying bribes to have water bills reduced. The result of both was that it cost poor people more to get access to water, he said.

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