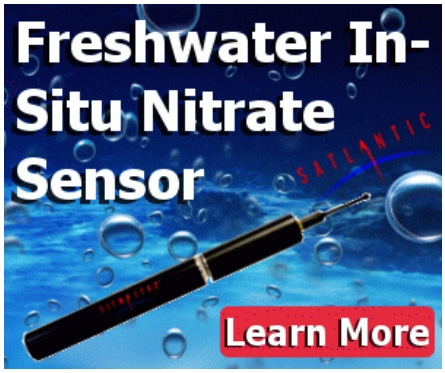

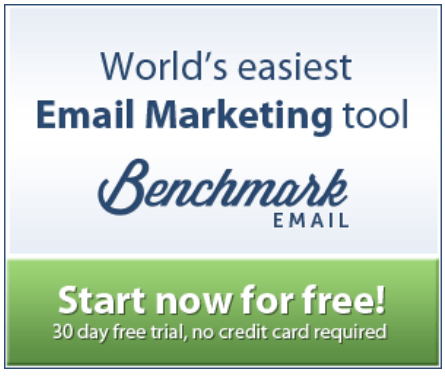

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Around 80% of sewage in Indian cities flows into water systems

TNN Mar 5, 2013, 04.55AM IST

Tags: Sewage Flowing into Water System | International Water Management Institute | City Sewage Disposal | Centre for Science and Environment

NEW DELHI: Is urban India drowning in its own excreta? Nearly 80% of the sewage generated in India flows untreated into its rivers, lakes and ponds, turning the water sources too polluted to use. The end result: groundwater in almost the entire country has nitrate levels higher than the prescribed levels - a result of sewage leaching into India's groundwater aquifers.

These grave figures were revealed at a meeting of experts on sewage and water issues organized by the Centre for Science and Environment as part of the 'Anil Agarwal Dialogues' series.

Speaking at the conference, Vice-President Hamid Ansari said, "Indian cities produce nearly 40,000 million litres of sewage per day, enough to irrigate 9 million hectares and barely 20% of this is treated." He said the untreated waste water was seeping into water sources, "thereby creating a ticking health bomb amongst our people".

Almost half of the urban Indian population still depends upon groundwater sources for drinking, cooking and bathing which puts them at direct risk from the polluted water, Sunita Narain, director general of CSE, said.

Other experts at the meeting shared details of how serious the water-sewage situation was getting as India urbanizes. They warned that the country faced a more complicated challenge as the process of urbanization would still leave millions in the villages who would depend upon the river and groundwater systems.

Tushar Shah of International Water Management Institute said India was by far the highest user of groundwater with more than 20 million irrigation wells across the country and almost 80% people still depending on self-supply of water for personal consumption.

The lack of focus on water-sewage systems has led to a position where not a single city in the country has a sewage system that covers the entire population. Only four cities - Pune, Chennai, Surat and Gurgaon - claim to connect at least 70% of the population through a network of closed drains. In most cities, the sewage simply mixes into the open drains and storm water drains, polluting water sources.

Almost 40% of the total sewage treatment capacity of the country exists in just two cities - Delhi and Mumbai. Class I and II towns - which are expected to grow and absorb most of the migration in the coming years â€" are faring the worst. Untreated sewage flowing into

water bodies has almost doubled from around 12,000 million litres per day to 24,000 million litres per day in Class I and II towns.

There are 302 Class I cities and 467 Class II towns with no sewage treatment facilities. Of the 21% of sewage passing though treatment plants in B towns, only 60% really meets the required standards. Overall, this means that just about 12% of sewage generated in Class I cities and Class II towns meet the standards, said Deepak Kantawala, an independent consultant told the conference.