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Water crisis, population surge prompt rethink on food: UN

Aug 22, 2011
#Food security #NewsTracker #UN Environment Programme

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Stockholm: Population growth and water stress are driving Earth to a food and environmental crunch that only better farming techniques and smarter use of the ecosystem will avert, a UN report issued today said.

The number of humans is expected to rise from seven billion in 2011 to at least nine billion by 2050, boosting demands for water that are already extreme in many countries and set to worsen through global warming.



“Currently, 1.6 billion people live in areas of physical water scarcity and this could easily grow to two billion soon if we stay on the present course,” according to the report.

“With the same (farming) practices, increased urbanisation and dietary patterns, the amount of water required for agriculture in terms of evapotranspiration would increase from 7,130

cubic kilometres today to 70-90 per cent more to feed nine billion people by 2050.”

The 35-page assessment was compiled by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and the **International Water Management Institute (IWMI)**, drawing mainly on estimates in peer-reviewed journals.

It was released at the start of World Water Week in Stockholm, a forum on water issues.

The report said that in many high-intensity food-producing regions, water limits are already being “reached or breached.”

They include the plains of northern China, India’s Punjab and the western United States.

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Climate change will accentuate scarcity as it will altering patterns and intensity of rainfall. In Africa alone, agricultural output could be reduced by 15-30 per cent by century's end.

Using today's farm techniques, focussing on always higher yields and ever-wider use of land, would be disastrous, said the report.

"If the same agriculture practices continue to be used, it would result in the inevitable degradation or complete destruction of the terrestrial freshwater and coastal ecosystems that are vital to life itself," it warned.

The report, An Ecosystem Services Approach to Water and Food Security, called for innovation to improve yields and end hunger but also be less damaging to the environment.

Ideas include better training for farmers, including incentives for environmentally-sound practices.

Crops should be selected that are more suited to scarce or erratic rainfall, better irrigation techniques would improve the efficiency of water use and catchment ponds in hot countries could be invaluable mini-reservoirs, helping small farmers to survive in times of absent rain, said the report.

Reuters

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