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Radical Changes in Water Management Needed

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One in three people is enduring one form or another of water scarcity, according to new findings released by the Comprehensive Assessment of Water Management in Agriculture at World Water Week in Stockholm. These alarming findings totally overrun predictions that this situation would come to pass in 2025.

The Comprehensive Assessment, carried out by 700 experts from around the world over the last five years, indicates that one third of the world's population is

currently living in places where water is either over-used - leading to falling groundwater levels and drying rivers - or can not be accessed due to the absence of the appropriate infrastructure.

The Assessment, the first of its kind critically examining policies and practices of water use and development in the agricultural sector over the last 50 years, was co-sponsored by the CGIAR, FAO, the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, and the Convention on Biological Diversity in a bid to find solutions to the challenge of balancing the water-food-environment needs.

It was spearheaded by IWMI, one of 15 agricultural research centres supported by the CGIAR that are striving to increase food production, increase rural incomes, and safeguard the environment.

Access to reliable, safe and affordable water is understood and accepted as a key step out of poverty for the world's 800 million rural poor. Many more people dependent on rivers, lakes and other wetlands risk falling into poverty because of declining groundwater supplies, loss of water rights and access, pollution, flooding and drought.

Africa's savannahs - which have most of the world's poorest people who typically rely on rain-fed agriculture - are singled out by the Assessment as holding the greatest potential for increasing water productivity, increasing agricultural yields per unit water used.

Already the consequences of water scarcity are evident in a number of countries. Egypt imports more than half of its food because it does not have enough water to grow it domestically. Australia is faced with major water scarcity in the Murray-Darling Basin as a result of diverting large quantities of water for use in agriculture. The Aral Sea disaster is another example where massive diversions of water to agriculture have caused widespread water scarcity, and one of the world's > Int worst environmental disasters.



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Agriculture uses up to 70 times more water to produce food than is used in drinking and other domestic purposes, including cooking, washing and bathing. As a rule of thumb, each calorie consumed as food requires about one litre of water to produce. In Thailand, the daily water required to grow food is about 2800 litres per person per day - 40 percent for cereals, 20 percent for animal products and the rest for pulses, fruits, sugar and oils. Italians use 3300 litres per person per day, half for ham and cheese and a third for pasta and bread. Clearly livestock and fish will play a significant role in future water use, but remarkably their importance is underestmated in water resources management.

Despite the impending threat, the Assessment identifies numerous bright spots – innovative approaches that hold potential for the future. These include very low cost technologies that facilitate access to, and use of water by, the rural poor. With health issues addressed, for example, people can effectively use urban wastewaters as a productive resource. Irrigation could also be reformed and transformed to reduce water wastage and increase productivity.

There will be many difficult choices entailing tradeoffs between city and agriculture users, between food production and the environment, and between fishers and farmers. There is simply not enough water to go around for all needs, yet allocation choices have to be made. In closed basins, where all water has already been allocated, giving water to one group means taking water away from another.

The CGIAR is a strategic agricultural research alliance dedicated to generating and applying the best available knowledge to stimulate agricultural growth, raise farmers' incomes and protect the environment. It supports 15 research centers worldwide conducting groundbreaking work to nourish the future. The International Water Management Institute (IWMI) based in Colombo, Sri Lanka is one such center of excellence. For more information, please visit http://www.cgiar.org or http://www.iwmi.org/assessment.

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