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Water, water not quite everywhere  
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World Water Week kicked off Monday in Stockholm with the release of a grim report about the dire state of access to water.

The report, Comprehensive Assessment of Water Management in Agriculture, says one-third of the world's population is living with a shortage of water, a scarcity scenario experts just five years ago suggested would not occur for another two decades.

The earlier and more optimistic assessment came about from country-by-country examinations. The latest and far grimmer report came about through an analysis of individual river basins.

The new report suggests an urgent need "to change business as usual in order to deal with growing scarcity water crisis we see in some countries like India, China and the Colorado River basin of U.S.A. and Mexico," said Frank Rijsberman, director general of the International Water Management Institute.

The good news is the scarcity issue can be addressed through conservation and efficiency. It's not that the world doesn't have enough water to go around, says David Molden, who led the assessment carried out by 700 experts over the last five years.

"To feed the growing population and reduce malnourishment, the world has three choices: expand irrigation by diverting more water to agriculture and building more dams, at a major cost to the environment; expand the area under rain-fed agriculture at the expense of natural areas through massive deforestation and other habitat destruction; or do more with the water we already use," Molden said. "We must grow more crop per drop, more meat and milk per drop, and more fish per drop."

The assessment points to Africa's savannahs as having the greatest potential for increased water productivity and, therefore, increased agricultural yields.

The report calls for more rain-watered agriculture, rather than irrigated farms. The simple act of storing water in plastic receptacles to save heavy rains for use later is a cheaper option than building irrigation systems and could double or triple food production in parts of Africa and Asia.

The payoff of changing practices now would slow the growth of demand for water by 50 per cent by 2050. Doing nothing would mean by that time twice as much water will be needed to feed everyone.

The links between water, hunger and poverty seem distant here in the heart of Canada's irrigation industry, where even in the midst of drought-like conditions, there is no suggestion of water rationing.

But the issue of water quantity and quality is very much a point of concern here, with surface water fully allocated and questions of how to accommodate the needs of a growing population and its associated industries raised at the same time glaciers are melting away.

But it is difficult to drive home the necessity for conservation when, in this intensely dry summer, Lethbridge residents are free to water their lawns and gardens to excess daily if they choose, and many balk at paying more for their precious, pennies-per-litre, treated municipal water but think nothing of paying 100 times that for bottled.

This is an edited version of an editorial yesterday in the Lethbridge Herald.