

# Water crunch looms without action on waste: UN report

March 12 2012, by Richard Ingham

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A picture taken on March 10, in Marseille, southern France shows a detail of an installation displayed in front of the Parc Chanot, two days ahead of the 6th World Water Forum. Water problems in many parts of the world are chronic and without a crackdown on waste will worsen as demand for food rises and climate change intensifies, the UN warned on Sunday.

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Issued on the eve of a six-day gathering on world water issues, the United Nations, in a massive report, said many daunting challenges lie ahead.

They include providing clean water and sanitation to the poor, feeding a

[world population](#) set to rise from seven billion to nine billion by 2050 and coping with the impact of global warming.

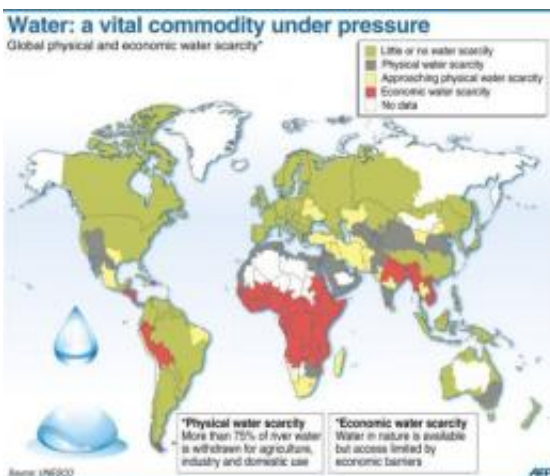
"Pressures on freshwater are rising, from the expanding needs of agriculture, food production and [energy consumption](#) to pollution and the weaknesses of water management," UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said in the report.

"[Climate change](#) is a real and growing threat. Without good planning and adaptation, hundreds of millions of people are at risk of hunger, disease, energy shortages and poverty."

The World Water Development Report is issued every three years to coincide with the World Water Forum, opening in this southern French city on Monday.

Written by experts in hydrology, economics and social issues under the aegis of UNESCO, it aims to be the world's reference manual for water.

The document, the fourth in the series, made these points:



Graphic showing the physical and economic scarcity of water in the world.

-- [Population growth](#) and a shift to more meat-intensive diet will drive up demand for food by some 70 percent by 2050. Using current methods, this will lead to a nearly 20 percent increase in global agricultural [water consumption](#).

Farming today accounts for around 70 percent of water use, ranging from 44 percent in rich countries to more than 90 percent in least developed economies.

-- Abstraction of aquifers has at least tripled in the past 50 years, supplying nearly half of all drinking water today. "In some hotspots, the availability of non-renewable groundwater resources has reached critical limits," says the report.

An aquifer is an underground layer of water-bearing rock or soil.

The report calls for an overhaul in water management and a massive effort to curb waste. Better irrigation systems, less thirsty crops and the use of "grey," meaning used, water to flush toilets are among the options.

-- The bill for coping with climate-induced water problems will be between 13.7 billion and 19.2 billion dollars annually between 2020 and 2050. This is based on the assumption UN climate talks limit global warming to two degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit).

"The current areas with water stress will be suffering more," said Olcay Unver, who coordinated the report, pointing as examples to the Middle East, South Asia and the southwestern United States.

-- About 2.5 billion people have no access to decent sanitation, a figure meaning that a key Millennium Development Goal for 2015 is likely to

be missed. In contrast, UN estimates last week said a goal for improving access to clean water would be met.

The report places the spotlight on competition for water between cities, farmers and ecosystems, and between countries as well. An estimated 148 states have international water basins within their territory and 21 countries lie entirely within them.

Even so, there seems no major risk of water wars, Unver told journalists in Paris last week. "Countries have shown great success in cooperating in water resources than fighting over them."

Emerging as a worrying phenomenon is the acquisition of farmland in Africa by western economies, Middle Eastern states and the emerging giants China and India to provide food or biofuels.

The risk is of simply transferring a wasteful water "footprint" elsewhere, possibly at the expense of a local ecosystem.

"The amount of water required for biofuel plantation could be particularly devastating to regions such as West Africa, where [water](#) is already scarce," says the report.

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