

Agriculture must make water use go further: experts

March 20 2018, by Damian Wroclavsky



Indian residents carry plastic pots with drinking water in a supply cart from a government water supply tanker at their residential colony in Chennai

In a world where water risks running short for many, the especially thirsty agricultural industry must learn how to manage the vital resource better, experts said Tuesday.

A day after the United Nations warned that 5.7 billion people could be short of [drinking water](#) by 2050, experts said agriculture faces its own threat.

A perfect example of the current management challenge is Brazil itself.

Latin America's biggest country is one of the world's principal food producers. That brings big riches, but also huge environmental challenges, including sucking more than half of the water from its rivers and lakes into the agricultural sector.

"We want to reduce this, to develop more efficient crops, to improve production systems and build more efficient equipment," said Mauricio Lopes, head of Brazil's agricultural research institute Embrapa.

Technology is helping to transform irrigation, with drones, computerized irrigation systems, data and satellites playing their part, speakers said at the 8th World Water Forum, an international gathering of water experts.

"There is a boom in techniques for water management for economizing this resource and also in the area of (crop) genetics," Lopes said. "This revolution is already there."

Blue water, green water

Water supplies are divided into what's known as blue water, like lakes, and [green water](#), or what's found underground and in woodland.

"It's important while we're continuously constrained by water availability to make sure that we're doing everything we can to use all of those resources more efficiently," said Claudia Sadoff, director of the International Water Management Institute.

"There will be places where traditional irrigation is essential and can be very efficient, and there are areas where the use of the water that is in our soils in our biomasses would be more efficient. I think we need to give much more attention to it."

Lopes stressed that Brazil, the country with the world's greatest biodiversity and nearly 18 percent of all drinking water, also has native vegetation covering two thirds of its territory.

"It's very important to discuss the link between water, nature and food. Brazil is extremely diverse, with six biomasses and very fragile zones. To maintain these riches, you need water," he said.

Brazil's agricultural sector is frequently accused of devastating the country's environment, but a leading representative told the water forum that this was a myth.

"We want to prove that rural producers take care of water better than anyone else, because in the end, if they ruin the [water](#) sources, then they destroy their own wealth," said Joao Marins, head of the Agriculture and Fishing Confederation, as he presented a new irrigation system.

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