

World water problems on tap at Brazil conference

March 17 2018, by Damian Wroclavsky



An Indian farmer and his cow walk on a dried paddy field in the village of Srilankabasti, on the outskirts of Agartala, the capital of drought-stricken northeastern state of Tripura

Brazil—the country with the world's greatest fresh water reserves—hosts an international conference next week on growing fears over the fragility of drinking water supplies in a heating planet.

Under the slogan "sharing [water](#)," the 8th World Water Forum will bring together 15 heads of state and government, 300 mayors and dozens of experts in the Brazilian capital Brasilia from Sunday to March 23.

An estimated 40,000 people are expected to attend, organizers say.

Participants will meet against the backdrop of the drama in Cape Town, which until earlier this month was projected to run out of water as early as July, forcing the closing of household taps and extreme rationing.

That crisis has now eased, with the local government saying that a campaign to bring 60 percent reduction in consumption has done enough to avert the shut-off.

But the drama is a reminder that many of the world's biggest fresh water systems are under pressure from pollution, overuse, dams and climate change.

"There are more reservoirs, more cars, more industry and more people. Counter measures to protect supplies remain very slim compared to the impacts we're seeing," Ney Maranhao, head of Brazil's National Water Agency, told AFP.

Ricardo Medeiros, director of the forum, which is put out by the World Water Council every three years, said the issue must be seen as more than a purely environmental problem.

"Water has always been seen as something important for all activities, but it has not been the first priority. The important thing not to talk about water just as something vital to life, but as something which creates economic development," he told AFP.

New approach?

"The traditional narratives clearly are not working," agreed Colin Strong, from the World Resources Institute and co-author of a study mapping public water management around the world.

"While it is true that Cape Town had a drought, droughts are physical occurrences which can be effectively managed when/where there are effective crisis response plans in place," he said by email.

"If cities do not have water management plans in place that can navigate scarcity, we may begin to see more Cape Towns in drought prone areas."

The forum comes at a challenging time for Brazil, which holds 18 percent of the world's drinkable water. The north-east of the country is suffering its longest drought in history and Brasilia itself has been under consumption limitations since January 2017.

"Water needs to be something that unites communities and countries, rather than the raw material sparking the next world war, as people say. The forum will try to suggest good practices, solutions and experiences," Medeiros said.

The first big event at the forum will be Monday when Unesco releases its annual study on the state of the world's water resources.

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