

Jordan to launch 'first phase' of Dead Sea canal

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An under construction pipe line on March 30, 2011 near Amman. Jordan said on Monday it plans to build parts of a project linking the Red Sea to the shrinking Dead Sea that would supply the parched country with desalinated water.

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Prime Minister Abdullah Nsur said the \$980-million project is designed

to provide Jordan with 100 million cubic metres (3.5 billion cubic feet) of water a year.

"The government has approved the project after years of technical, political, economic and geological studies," Nsur told a news conference.

Under the plan, Jordan will draw water from the Gulf of Aqaba at the northern end of the Red Sea to the nearby Risheh Height, where a desalination plant is to be built to treat water.

"The desalinated water will go south to Aqaba, while salt water will be pumped to the Dead Sea," Nsur said.

The Dead Sea, the world's lowest and saltiest body of water, is on course to dry out by 2050.

The degradation of the Dead Sea started in the 1960s when Israel, Jordan and Syria began to divert water from the Jordan River, the Dead Sea's main supplier.

However, environmentalists fear that an influx of seawater could undermine the Dead Sea's fragile ecosystem.

"We are thinking of selling desalinated water to Israel and buying water from Lake Tiberias (Sea of Galilee)," said Nsur.



A dry patch of land near the Dead Sea, south of the Jordanian capital Amman, on November 9, 2009. Jordan said on Monday it plans to build parts of a project linking the Red Sea to the shrinking Dead Sea that would supply the parched country with desalinated water.

The prime minister said Jordan wanted water to supply its northern regions, while Israel also needs water in the south.

Officials say the 500,000 Syrian refugees that Jordan is hosting are stretching its meagre water resources.

The majority of refugees are living in the north, particularly the Zaatari

camp, home to about 130,000 Syrians.

"A cubic meter of desalinated water would cost Israel one dinar (\$1.4), while buying water from Tiberias will be cheaper for reasons related to transportation, costing us one-third of a dinar per cubic metre. It's a good deal," he added.

The water ministry says Jordan, where 92 percent of the land is desert, will need 1.6 billion cubic metres of water a year to meet its requirements by 2015, while the population of 6.8 million is growing by almost 3.5 percent a year.

Jordan had initially agreed in principle to build, along with its Palestinian and Israeli neighbours, an \$11-billion pipeline from the Red Sea to refill the rapidly shrinking Dead Sea and provide drinking water.



The drying shores of the Dead Sea, south of the Jordanian capital Amman, on November 9, 2009. Jordan said on Monday it plans to build parts of a project linking the Red Sea to the shrinking Dead Sea that would supply the parched country with desalinated water.

"The high cost of that project prompted the government to come up with the ideas we announced today, which we call the 'first phase'," Water Minister Hazem Nasser told the news conference.

"We had no other option. We will revive the idea of saving the Dead Sea, while at the same time having drinking water. And we do not need to reach an agreement with Israel."

Jordan signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1994.

In July, Jordan inaugurated a nearly one-billion-dollar project to supply the capital with 100 million cubic metres of water from the 300,000-year-old Disi aquifer in the south to help meet a chronic shortage.

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