

Report: Threats to world's fresh water worsening

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By Colleen Valles

San Francisco—A California think tank's report says that the world's freshwater resources are more threatened now than they have ever been, facing such challenges as degraded water quality, climate change and wetland destruction.

The report by the Oakland based Pacific Institute for Studies in Development, Environment, and Security was completed at the behest of the United Nations Environmental Programme. It encourages governments and non-governmental organizations around the world to examine policy and management of the resources.

The report is meant to provide an overview of issues facing the world's water supply, many of which are discussed individually. It looks at water related diseases, destruction and degradation of freshwater ecosystems, pollution and climate change.

It's important to have an overview of water issues because they all affect each other, said Peter Gleick, director of the institute and the report's lead author.

"There are many different issues, but they're all related," he said.

A major problem the report identifies is the lack of the availability of clean drinking water for about 12 billion people around the world and lack of adequate sanitation services for about 24 billion people.

"The fact that there are 5 (million) to 10 million deaths a year from water-related diseases is bleak," Gleick said. "Those are diseases we know how to treat."

Those diseases include cholera, malaria, dengue fever and dysentery, which the report warns will continue to rise if basic water needs aren't met.

The report calls for international cooperation on water problems, included sharing technological innovations that help people clean and use water more efficiently and making water quality and availability priorities.

Water issues aren't relegated only to Third World countries either. In the arid Western United States, water has long been the subject of battles.

"The United States has some of the best water quality laws on the books, but the challenge has always been to enforce them," Gleick said. "Local community groups and local activists have been very, very helpful in calling for and pushing for these laws."

Global warming, which is still being debated in scientific circles, is something that must be planned for, the report states.

That's because expected impacts of climate change are increased precipitation and evaporation, changes in regional rainfall, snowfall and snowmelt patterns, as well as affecting storm severity.

“One of the new pieces of information in the last five to 10 years is how important healthy ecosystems are for human health,” he said. “We're learning you can't separate human health and ecosystem health.”