



Mongolia Faces Critical Water Shortfall Warns UNEP Report

Urgent Action Needed to Protect Country's Water Supply

Ulaanbaatar/Bangkok, 22 March 2011 - Climate change and rapid urbanization are threatening fragile water resources in Mongolia, where more than half of the inhabitants have no access to clean water, says a report released today by the Mongolia Water Authority and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

According to the 'Urban Water Vulnerability to Climate Change in Mongolia' report, extreme temperatures and natural disasters such as droughts, flooding and heavy snowfalls are becoming more frequent and annual average temperatures have increased by 2.1° celsius since the 1940s.

"Mongolia's temperature has already risen by more than 2°C in the last seventy years. The study's climate scenarios suggest that the country will have to get used to having much less water in the future," says Dr. Z. Batbayr, Deputy Director of Mongolia Water Authority. "The impact of this will be seen across the board, through the degradation of natural environment, ecosystems, and harm to the economy."

The effects of climate change have also been compounded by rapid urbanization, reducing the availability of water for domestic and industrial use.

Mongolia's total water consumption is approximately 540 million m³/year and over 80% is consumed by the industrial and agricultural sectors and 20% by domestic use. About 80% of drinking water comes from aquifers.

Globally, Mongolia is one of sixty countries with limited water resources. There is over 11, 000 m³ of water per year for each of the country's 2.4 million people.

"If the status quo for water management in Mongolia continues, the country will not be able to provide sustainable water resources for its population under future climate change," says Dr. Young-Woo Park, UNEP Regional Representative for Asia and the Pacific. "Steps need to be taken now so that Mongolia adapts to its changing environment, and I am glad that the Government has plans to act based on the findings of the report."

The situation is particularly serious in urban areas like the capital of Ulaanbaatar, where nearly 40 percent of the country's population resides and where increasing demand and pollution is exerting added pressure on water supplies, sanitation and other public services, adds the report. .

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In Ulaanbaatar 50% of the one million population live in informal settlements (Ger areas) with a low-level of public services. The daily water consumption is only about 5-10 litres per capita per day, and very few are connected to the city's water distribution network.

Currently, water is being withdrawn faster than the rate of discharge in the city, where groundwater tables have shown a marked decline in the past 50 years.

A large part of the water resources for the city comes from the Tuul River, where continuing ecosystem degradation will prove extremely costly in terms of water and other services lost, the report says.

Overall, improved conservation of the Upper Tuul ecosystem is estimated by the report to be worth some US\$979 million through the provision of water, tourism, herding, and forest products.

The report makes four (OR FIVE?) key adaptation recommendations for Mongolia:

- 1) Develop an Integrated Urban Water Management plan for the Tuul River Basin, with active planning and management of land use and human activities;
- 2) Increase investment and rehabilitate existing water supply networks for the domestic water supply. This should include raising public awareness about saving water, building water recycling plants, and improving the management of water supply utilities;
- 3) Take steps to reduce the population's vulnerability to extreme weather events, such as improving existing flood protection systems, install an early warning system, review housing and settlement plans, and raise public awareness about extreme weather events; and
- 4) Do more to improve water quality, particularly through the rehabilitation of wastewater treatment plants, especially in Ulaanbaatar.
- 5) Better enforcement of the legal framework on water supply, disposal and wastewater treatment. This should include the introduction of practices to reuse and recycle wastewater.

The report was launched on World Water Day 2011, when the focus is on sustainable development in the runup to RIO+20 meeting, transboundary waters, sanitation and coping with water scarcity.

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NOTES TO EDITORS

The “*Urban Water Vulnerability to Climate Change in Mongolia*” was produced by Mongolia Water Authority with the support of the United Nations Environment Programme. It is a joint collaborative effort of the Water Authority of the Mongolian Ministry of Nature and the non-governmental organisation, “Arvian Khelkhee”.

In recent years the exploration for natural resources has also increased rapidly and many rivers, or parts of the rivers, are polluted by industrial and mining activities. Many river basins are under intensive use due to mining for gold, silver, coal, precious stones, gravel, and other natural resources.

Gold mining affects the quality of 28 rivers in 8 provinces of Mongolia. In particular, the upper stream of the Orkhon River, downstream reaches of the Tuul river, and the Eroo river in the Selenge river basin. Also the Orkhon, Tuul, Kharaa and Khangal river basins are experiencing increased pollution by urbanization and industrial activities within the basin

In the southern part of Mongolia (Gobi Desert) the water availability is 10 times less than the world average and several ten times less than northern part of the country

IS THIS IN THE SOUTH? 70% of the residents either acquire their own well or get water from public kiosks, 31 % of the total population is connected to the water supply by a network of pipelines; 24.7% obtains their water from water trucks; 35.6% from water distribution kiosks; and about 9.0% use spring water.

About World Water Day:

The UN General Assembly designated the first World Water Day in 1993, and each subsequent year the March 22 event has highlighted a specific aspect of freshwater sustainability. Over the years, World Water Days have focused on transboundary waters, sanitation, coping with water scarcity, and water and culture.

For World Water Day 2010, UNEP launched the *Clean Water for a Healthy World* report that also feeds into the discussion by detailing how water quality is as important as water quantity for satisfying human and environmental needs, yet has received far less investment, scientific support, and public attention. Prepared by the Pacific Institute, one of the world’s leading non-profit research organizations on freshwater issues, the report brought global attention to the need for clean, safe water—and action and policy to address water pollution.