

# Failing water scheme leaves Beijing high and dry

• 12:49 09 December 2008 by [Fred Pearce](#)



Water is in short supply around Beijing; a scheme to divert water from the wet south is now in trouble (Image: Stock.xchng)

The completion date for an engineering mega-project to bring water from a tributary of the River Yangtze in the wet south of China to the capital city, in the arid north, has been postponed again.

China's northern plain, its breadbasket for thousands of years, [is running dry](#). With rivers often empty, the country is pumping out underground water reserves to keep taps flowing and crops growing. So, in 2003, the government promised relief with the South-North Diversion, a \$60-billion scheme aiming to divert water northwards from three different locations.

When the scheme was launched, Beijing's mayor promised the water in plenty of time for the Olympics that took place earlier this year. Then the project was postponed to 2010. But last week, Chinese officials set a new completion date of 2014.

Now the whole project is in serious doubt. The eastern route, using the ancient Grand Canal, is held up because factories are polluting the canal. The western route, tapping the Yangtze headwaters in Tibet, has not been started. Officials also blame pollution for the latest delay to the middle route - a canal stretching more than 1200 kilometres from the Danjiangkou reservoir on the River Han. They say more treatment plants must be built to bring the water supply to a high enough quality.

This is no surprise. Even before the project began, Chinese scientists warned **New Scientist** that, without a clean-up, taking a third of the water from the Han River would render the downstream city of Wuhan uninhabitable.

<http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn16225-failing-water-scheme-leaves-beijing-high-and-dry.html>