

Water relief by 2014 for arid Beijing, planners say



Water diverted through a massive south-north project will reach Beijing by 2014, partly easing the city's worsening shortage, a senior planning official confirmed.

Liu Yinchun , deputy director of the municipal government's Development and Reform Commission, also confirmed hundreds of thousands of people in Henan and Hubei would be relocated to make way for the water-diversion scheme.

The project aims to supply the arid north with water from the Yangtze River via three big waterways.

Liu said he was confident the central channel of the project would be completed in 2014. Beijing would be supplied with water from the Danjiangkou reservoir in Hubei, which stretches across the Han River, a tributary of the Yangtze.

He conceded that the city might have to endure difficult times until then, with the country's north hit by drought nearly every year.

But he played down the city's water shortage problems despite environmentalists warning of a looming crisis and the grave impact of water-diversion schemes. "We have been diverting water from upstream regions [in Hebei] every year, and we really appreciate the support of our neighbouring areas," he said. "I don't think the water shortage in Beijing is very severe."

He said the government would continue to push conservation and the use of recycled water by upgrading standards for sewage treatment in dozens of wastewater facilities across the city in the next five years.

All sewage treatment plants will be able to produce recycled water - used for parks, rivers and lakes - by the end of the 12th Five-Year Programme in 2015, he pledged. The city is expected to use one billion cubic metres of recycled water in 2015. Annual average water consumption has been steady in recent years at 3.5 billion cubic metres.

On waste disposal, Liu vowed to heed public concerns about more incinerators being built. The controversial plan sparked protests in Beijing and other cities in recent years.

About 20,000 tonnes of rubbish is created in Beijing per day, with 90 per cent of it buried in landfills, 8 per cent composted and 2 per cent burned, according to figures from the end of 2009, the Beijing Review reported.

Liu said more incinerators would be built in the next five years to handle at least 40 per cent of household waste by 2015, given the limited land suitable for landfills.

While the government is trying to reduce rubbish by encouraging recycling, he said increasing the use of incinerators was inevitable for big cities despite health concerns. "But we will take public opinion into consideration and try to build incinerators far away from populated residential areas as much as possible," he said.

Mainland environmentalists and other critics have argued that the city is not ready for incinerators because household waste is usually collected without being separated, meaning cancer-causing dioxins could be produced by burning it.

Energy use is also in the cross hairs. The city's energy intensity - measured by consumption per unit of gross domestic product - has been China's lowest in the past few years, mainly because it relocated polluting factories ahead of the Olympics in 2008. "But it will get more difficult to improve energy efficiency compared with the [previous five-year] period, as there is less and less room left for improvement," Liu said.

SCMP