

Water woes to dry out bathhouses

Source: Global Times

[05:20 May 05 2011]



A woman enjoys a hot tub at a ski resort next to the Bird's Nest on December 31, 2010. Skiing and bathing activities number among Beijing's high water-consuming industries. Photo: CFP

By Li Yanhui

Beijing water authorities have revealed a plan to keep the capital's wells running until 2014. Meanwhile they will cease offering approval for the development of luxurious bathhouses in order to tackle Beijing's worsening water supply shortage.

Rainfall in Beijing has decreased by about 20 percent in the past five years, and water supplies to the capital's reservoirs have also dropped by about 70 percent, exacerbating an existing water shortage, Cheng Jing, the head of the Beijing Water Authority, told the Beijing Public Service Radio station on Tuesday.

The city will continue to maintain approximately 40,000 wells to supply about 20 percent of Beijing's water until 2014, when the South-to-North Water Diversion Project is to start

bringing 1 billion cubic meters of water annually to the capital from the Yangtze River. Meanwhile, authorities will invest about 200 million yuan (\$31 million) to upgrade the wells to fend off bad water quality, according to Cheng.

An officer with the water authority's press department confirmed the information on Wednesday but refused to elaborate.

"Well water quality has worsened in recent years," the Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs' director Ma Jun said on Wednesday.

The city built many wells in the 1960s, but over the decades, the groundwater supply was exhausted and wells had to be dug deeper. Others were simply abandoned. The remaining 40,000 wells are mainly located in the capital's suburban areas, though some are still in operation at large-scale units or companies in the urban area, like military facilities or universities, according to Ma.

"Over-exploitation and pollution have worsened the water quality," he said. "The water level drop will also cause ground subsidence."

The city will continue to seriously manage water resources, their efficient use and the disposal of wastewater, Cheng said.

"The water rationing policy will be expanded to all other enterprises, beyond the large water-consumption enterprises that were included in the past," he added.

Authorities have stopped approving development of new luxury bathhouses and will make some management regulations to restrict the bath and ski industries. Within five years, the city will eliminate a large group of high water-consumption enterprises and will increase the use of recycled water for green land irrigation, according to the Beijing News on Wednesday.

In spite of the extreme water shortage, Beijing's bathhouse industry and especially its hot springs have developed rapidly. There were over 3,000 bath centers in the city as of last year, but there were only 39 in 1989, according to a June 2010 report on the website of the environmental advocacy group Friends of Nature.

Beijing only has 2.6 billion cubic meters of water for use, but it consumes 3.6 billion annually, according to a China Economic Times report on April 29.

From 2000 to 2007, the city excessively exploited 5.6 billion cubic meters of underground water, Li Wei, the director of the Development Research Center of the State Council told the China Economic Times.

Cheng told the Legal Mirror in March 2010 that Beijing consumes 3 to 4 billion cubic meters of water annually.