

Thirsty Beijing awash in water woes



GETTY IMAGES The Danjiangkou Dam is seen here under construction in July 2006 in central Hubei province, China. Its water is the source of plans to solve Beijing's thirst for more water.

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This capital's growing thirst for clean water is clashing with provincial demands and concerns that plans to tap [China](#)'s rivers will hurt an already troubled environment.

As a result, China has delayed by four years a project to transfer water more than 600 miles from a tributary of the Yangtze River to Beijing and Tianjin, pushing the completion date to 2014.

First proposed by Mao Zedong in the 1950s, the south-to-north water diversion is designed to maintain explosive industrialization in - and migration to - the country's northern cities.

Critics of the \$62 billion project have long argued that it is riddled with environmental flaws. Some of the strongest calls for a delay come from officials in central Hubei province, home to the Danjiangkou Dam, where the water would originate.

Wang Fenyu, a project official, told the Changjiang (Yangtze) Times recently that completion of what is known as the "central route" had been pushed back from 2010 until 2014 "to prevent ecological and environment risks."

To ensure Beijing's thirst is not quenched with dirty water, "Hubei must build even more water-treatment plants and ecological restoration facilities," Mr. Wang said. The project originally was slated to be finished by last summer's Olympics.

The central route, one of three planned large water projects, is designed to divert 44.8 billion cubic meters of water each year from the Han River, a major tributary of the Yangtze, to supply Beijing and Tianjin.

Construction of an eastern route, which would channel water from the Yangtze's lower reaches to Shandong province, also has been crippled by pollution problems. A report by the official Xinhua news agency in 2006 described China's longest river as "cancerous," warning that it could be a "dead river" in five years.

There are plans for an even more controversial western route, not slated for completion until 2050, which would divert rivers that flow through the Tibetan plateau to arid northwestern regions.

In addition to the upper Yangtze, another river in Tibet that could be affected is the Yarlong Tsangpo. It becomes the Brahmaputra after it winds across the Indian border and down into Bangladesh. Any diversion by China would reduce the water level of the river and threaten the livelihoods of millions of Indian and Bangladeshi farmers downstream.

For now, though, the central route prompts the most immediate concerns, potentially affecting Chinese farmers toiling on the cracked earth of Hebei province, Beijing's poor neighbor.

The canal is already transporting about 300 million cubic meters of water a year to Beijing from three reservoirs during the dry season.

Hebei's farmers also are losing out to the plundering of underground water resources by local factories and city residents, said Zhang Zhongmin, founder of the Green Friend Association in Hebei.

“Some factories and urban families are digging secret wells to tap the underground water, but there is no punishment even if they are caught,” he said. “If people and enterprises don’t know how to save water and if there is no proper legislation, then the water-diversion project will be unsustainable and doomed to fail.”

The government has paid compensation to farmers forced off their land to make way for the project, but Mr. Zhang said the payments are insufficient.

“It is not enough in the long term, but many farmers don’t worry too much about that when they have the money in their hands. But the land is a farmer’s lifeline. The money will run out, and then the farmer will realize he has no land,” he said.

Sandra Postel, director of the Global Policy Water Project, based in Massachusetts, said land, water and pollution issues caused by the water-diversion project may increase disputes within China. Protests have increased markedly in recent years.

But Wen Bo, head of Pacific Environment’s China program, suspects that the government will be able to get its way.

“People are not empowered; they do not have the political power to defend their water rights. Many are simply not aware they have the right to use the water in their own backyard,” he said.

A California-based environmental group called International Rivers has said that China’s water-transfer plan is “fundamentally flawed” and will not solve the country’s water problems.

Instead it advocates more extensive collection of rainwater and better water-management practices, such as increasing water tariffs to deter wastefulness.

Senior Chinese officials, however, say that resolving the country’s water woes requires drastic action. Long before becoming prime minister in March 2003, Wen Jiabao warned back in 1999 that water shortages threatened the “survival of the Chinese nation.”

There have been other radical policy suggestions put forward to avert a potential crisis. Last year, Mei Xinyu, a researcher with the Ministry of Commerce, called for the government to move its capital away from drought-stricken Beijing to the Yangtze River area to prevent it from being a “burden on the rest of the nation.”

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