

International Year of freshwater

2003

factsheet

2003 - International Year of Freshwater

The United Nations General Assembly declared 2003 as the **International Year of Freshwater** to focus our attention on protecting and respecting our water resources, as individuals, communities, as nations, and in the global context.

Around the world, there are 1.1 billion people who lack access to safe drinking water. 2.4 billion are also without adequate sanitation. Improved access to safe drinking water, sanitation, and better water resource management are fundamental to poverty reduction, sustainable development, and ecosystem protection.

Australian experience has shown that the long-term sustainability of water resources must be managed along with the economic viability and growing demands of agriculture, human consumption and industry. Provision and maintenance of water infrastructure alone is not the solution to the world's water problems. Integrated resource management, in addition to appropriate infrastructure are needed if the international community is to achieve the UN millennium goals for drinking water and sanitation.

As the world's second driest continent (after Antarctica), Australia must use its limited water resources wisely. Inefficient and inappropriate water use has created problems of national significance: rising water tables, increased salinity of groundwater and soil, decreasing quality of surface water, increasing evidence of algal blooms and degradation of coastal areas.

It was on this basis that Australia developed an integrated approach that recognises water as a social, economic and ecological good; balancing consumptive demands on our water supplies with the need to maintain the health of our river systems. This is known as the Council of Australian Governments' Water Reform Framework.

Progressive implementation of the Framework has helped our water-using industries adopt an integrated management approach which supports production of agricultural goods for international markets. Australian agricultural industries supply high-value fresh food exports to countries and regions where demand for food is growing and stable supplies are essential.

Water management plans being developed provide for environmental flows in both surface and groundwater and aim to preserve ecologically significant environments.

Cooperative partnerships between all levels of government to plan, develop and manage Australia's water resources are a vital part of the national strategy. The Commonwealth has initiated a number of mechanisms that assist regional communities to undertake on-ground coordinated action to improve the sustainability of our agricultural and rural industries and address the degradation of our land and water resources. These programs include the Natural Heritage Trust and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality.

The economy, the well being of the population and the environment all depend on the wise use of our water resources. The International Year of Freshwater will be instrumental in raising awareness of water issues in Australia and across the globe, and in educating water users on how to minimise their impact on water quality, how to maximise the benefits from the water available, and how to become involved in water programs.

Everybody has a responsibility to learn more about water and its role in Australia. This understanding will contribute to a better quality of life for future generations.

For more information on the Year of Freshwater in Australia visit www.freshwater2003.gov.au or visit the official international web site at www.wateryear2003.org



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