



International Year of Freshwater 2003



Press Release

UN Launches International Year of Freshwater to Galvanize Action on Critical Water Problems

(New York, 10 December) – The International Year of Freshwater 2003 will be launched on 12 December at a special event at the United Nations, with participation by acclaimed activist Alex Matthiessen, who is the Hudson Riverkeeper, and legendary folksinger Pete Seeger, performing with an international children's chorus. The Year was declared by the UN General Assembly to galvanize action on the critical water problems the world faces.

“Lack of access to water – for drinking, hygiene and food security – inflicts enormous hardship on more than a billion members of the human family,” said United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan. “Water is likely to become a growing source of tension and fierce competition between nations, if present trends continue, but it can also be a catalyst for cooperation. The International Year of Freshwater can play a vital role in generating the action needed – not only by governments but also by civil society, communities, the business sector and individuals all over the world.”

Agreement on Targets

The International Year comes at an important time, just as world leaders have agreed on key targets to tackle water and sanitation problems for the 1.2 billion people without access to safe drinking water and the 2.4 billion people who lack proper sanitation. More than 3 million people die every year from diseases caused by unsafe water.

In September 2000, world leaders pledged at the United Nations Millennium Summit to halve by 2015 the proportion of people unable to reach or to afford safe drinking water. And at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, a matching target was agreed to halve the proportion of people lacking adequate sanitation, also by 2015.

To meet these targets requires coordinated action, not just from governments but also from people who use water and those who invest in it. Substantial resources are also needed. Currently it is estimated that approximately \$30 billion per year is spent on meeting drinking water supply and sanitation requirements worldwide. An estimated \$14 to \$30 billion additional per year would be needed to meet the agreed water and sanitation targets.

Thanks to gains in the 1990s, 63 countries are on track to reach the target on access to water. But in sub-Saharan Africa, only 58 per cent of the population have access to improved water sources. In the poorest, least developed countries, no improvement in the proportion of people with access to water was made over the decade.

(OVER)

Water scarcity is also a critical issue for future development. Water use has been growing at more than twice the rate of population during the 20th century. A number of regions, such as the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia, are chronically water-short. Already, four out of every ten people worldwide live in areas experiencing water scarcity. By 2025, as much as two thirds of the world's population – an estimated 5.5 billion people -- may be living in countries that face a serious shortage of water.

Plans for WaterYear2003

The United Nations, governments and many non-governmental and private sector partners are planning a wide range of events and activities for the International Year of Freshwater, which is being jointly coordinated by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

The launch on 12 December will feature a dialogue on “The Challenges of Freshwater” with opening remarks by United Nations Deputy Secretary-General Louise Fréchette. Participants will include: H.E. Talbak Nazarov, the Foreign Minister of Tajikistan, which initiated the proposal for the Year; Nitin Desai, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs; H.E. June Clark, Ambassador of Barbados; H.E. Milos Alcalay, Ambassador of Venezuela; and Gourisankar Ghosh, Executive Director of the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council. Mr. Matthiessen will take part in a press briefing following the event.

In March 2003, the United Nations will release the first edition of the World Water Development Report, a joint project involving 23 UN agencies. The report will provide a comprehensive view of today's water problems and offer wide-ranging recommendations for meeting future water demand. It will be launched on 22 March, to coincide with the annual observance of World Water Day and the World Water Forum, an international conference being held in Kyoto, Japan.

A special website for the Year, at www.wateryear2003.org, will provide extensive links to information materials, reports and planned activities and events around the world, by United Nations agencies, governments, and non-governmental and private sector partners.

Media contacts:

UN Department of Public Information
Rolando Gomez, tel: (212) 963-2744
Klomjit Chandrapanya, tel: (212) 963-9495
Pragati Pascale, tel: (212) 963-6870
E-mail: mediainfo@un.org

UNESCO Bureau of Public Information
Peter Coles, tel: (33-1) 45 68 17 10, e-mail: p.coles@unesco.org
Amy Otchet, tel: (33-1) 45 68 17 04, e-mail: a.otchet@unesco.org

On the Web: www.wateryear2003.org