



# International Year of Freshwater 2003



Press Release

## **WaterYear2003: International Year Aims to Galvanize Action on Critical Water Problems**

(New York, December 2002) – The availability of clean, fresh water is one of the most important issues facing humanity today – and will be increasingly critical for the future, as growing demands outstrip supplies and pollution continues to contaminate rivers, lakes and streams.

To raise awareness and galvanize action to better manage and protect this crucial resource, the United Nations General Assembly has proclaimed 2003 as the International Year of Freshwater (WaterYear2003).

“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 cut in half 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. It is estimated that an additional \$14 to \$30 billion per year would be needed to meet the targets on water and sanitation.

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. As a result of overexploitation of groundwater, water tables are dropping and some rivers, such as the Colorado River in the United States and the Yellow River in China, often run dry before they reach the sea.

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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.

To address this situation, wide-scale improvements need to be made in the efficiency of water use, such as getting “more crop per drop” in agriculture, the largest consumer of water. Watersheds need to be better managed, and leakage reduced, especially in cities, where water losses total 40 per cent or more of the water supply.

### **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).

One cluster of events will take place around World Water Day, celebrated annually on 22 March. The activities for the Day are being coordinated by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in 2003. The United Nations will release the first edition of the World Water Development Report, the result of a joint project involving 23 UN agencies that provides a comprehensive view of today's water problems and offers wide-ranging recommendations for meeting future water demand. It will be launched at the Third World Water Forum, a major international meeting to be held from 16 to 23 March in Kyoto, Japan.

Other activities will take place in connection with Earth Day, which is celebrated in many countries on 22 April. The Earth Day Network, a non-governmental umbrella group coordinating events worldwide, plans to focus the day on freshwater issues. World Environment Day, observed annually on 5 June, will also focus this year on water issues, according to UNEP, the coordinating agency.

A special website for the Year, at [www.wateryear2003.org](http://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.

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