

# Ministry of Agriculture urged to take serious steps

## An investigative 'committee must be set up to find out who is responsible'

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THESE DAYS, many people including city dwellers, moshavniks and kibbutzniks believe a committee of inquiry should be established to investigate the water crisis in Israel.

A moshavnik grabbed some parched earth and threw it into the air, "The lack of rain has me worried. What is worrying me even more is that no one is promising me that next winter will be a better one. I have a feeling that no one in the government, especially in the Ministry of Agriculture, is really taking serious steps."

Asked about the cuts in the water quotas, if this was not a serious step, he replied, "Yes it is serious but it is not enough. Officially, the cut is about 10 per cent; with me the cut is closer to 30 per cent because I was forced to use water in February and March. I believe the cut for farmers should be much greater, but under the condition we are compensated for not being able to produce. It is not my fault that there isn't any water now. This is why a committee must be set up to find out who is responsible!"

A kibbutznik from one of the most prosperous kibbutzim in the country was very worried when he discussed the water crisis.

"I'm worried because my livelihood depends on water. For us it means that we must stop production. We will be out of work. Who will compensate us? Who will pay the price? Yes! I do believe that a committee of inquiry should be established. The minister of agriculture should have had the courage to come out on such a year like the present one and say, 'No one knows what next year will be like, we'd better keep some water in case next year will be as bad if not worse than the present one.' Instead, what does he do, cut the water quotas by about 10 per cent. It's a joke!"

Asked what he would do if he was the minister of agriculture, the kibbutznik replied, "For starters, I would not have allowed the planting of cotton this summer. We could have saved about 300 million cubic metres of water which might be sorely needed next year." He then added that the farmers should be properly compensated for not growing cotton.

A leading scientist at the Technion, Prof. Gedalia Shelef, also agreed with the moshavniks and kibbutzniks.

"About 70 per cent of the water goes to agriculture. Everyone knows that in Israel the chief consumer of water is cotton. The cotton growers are demanding government help because the price of cotton in the world market has dropped below the level of profitability. So why is cotton still being grown? If the farmers have to be subsidized anyway, subsidize

them not to grow cotton. We will save not only water but other production costs too, like the use of fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides.

"I know that not to plant and to get paid is in direct opposition to the established socialist philosophy which states 'farming at all cost.'

"What disturbs me is that no one seems to be taking into consideration the severe water shortage and its direct effect on agriculture itself. I believe the whole matter concerning water policy should be investigated and maybe new priorities established. We are facing a catastrophe, but people tend to be optimistic by nature and live with the hope that next year will bring great quantities of rain. But what will we do if the rains will not come next year either?"

He explained that another part of the problem is that the lack of rain lowers the quality of the water.

He explained that rains dilute reservoirs, including micro-organisms and salinity in water. Another danger is that in the present situation, when quotas are cut, farmers tend to use more purified sewage water for irrigation. "Sometimes farmers might be tempted to cut corners, and use sewage water that has not been fully purified."

Another person who believes that a commission of inquiry should be established is former MK Yosef Tamir. In the late 70s, as the head of a Knesset sub-committee on ecology, he chaired an investigation on this matter. The investigation was in-depth, taking over 18 months to complete.

In his book *Haver Knesset* (Knesset Member) he tells about this committee and its findings. "The bottom line being that during 30 years Israel's water policy has been to use water above and beyond its capabilities. No steps have been taken to cut down on the use of water, because of the strong agricultural lobby. During the first 30 years of statehood Israel has over-used more than 1.7 billion cubic metres of water, which endangers water resources of future generations."

This committee came out with a series of recommendations concerning water policy. These recommendations were adopted by the Knesset more than five years ago but most of the decisions have not been implemented.

Among the recommendations: To invest heavily to increase alternative water resources, such as the use of recycled sewage water and run-off flood water. To increase educational campaigns in the conservation and more effective use of water. To find ways to stop the waste of water by municipalities, public institutions and private users.

Concerning the farmers, the committee proposed and Knesset

adopted the proposal to reallocate the water quotas in different areas of Israel, according to different plants and orchards, in order to use this resource to the optimum. An effort will be made to increase the quality of water for drinking, agricultural use and other purposes.

Tamir added that in 1979 the then minister of agriculture Ariel Sharon promised in the Knesset that the cabinet would devote at least one meeting per year to discuss the water problems of Israel. "Until today not even one meeting has been held, and this promise remains only a promise."

Confronted with these facts and demands that he take a stronger hand, Minister of Agriculture Arye Nehamkin, who usually has a cool temperament, was angered. 'Yes,

these farmers come to you and say cut more in the water quotas, don't let them grow cotton. That's what they tell journalists. Do you know what they tell me? 'Cut my neighbour's water off but don't touch mine.'"

When asked about the proposal to stop the planting of cotton, he loses his temper, saying, "Pigish. They are very selfish. They want to cut the production of cotton so that the water can be used for their industries such as flowers or fish."

"I think that the 10 per cent cut that we decided on is enough. But just the same, I called on experts to review this decision, and in a week or two after hearing their recommendations I might increase the cut, but if you ask me today, I say that the 10 per cent cut is enough. Remember, I am the first minister of agriculture to order a cut in water quotas. I can also promise you that in case we have a good year with plenty of rains next winter I might decide to continue this cut in an effort to reduce the huge overdraft, which is equivalent to a full year of water use, or about 1.6 billion cubic metres of water."

When asked what will happen if next winter is as dry as this year, he replied, "Then we will really have a problem and we might even have to stop growing vegetables and other field crops so that the available water will go to irrigate the orchards." He then gave a mischievous grin, "Who knows, we might have to ask for water from America."

Asked about forming a committee of inquiry on this matter, "Yes, why not? This seems to be the style now, on every little subject to hold an investigation. I think you and maybe others are trying to create a panic in the public. If everyone would carry out our instructions there wouldn't be any reason to worry."

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