

Juggling the shrinking water-supply

By YITZHAK OKED

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TEL AVIV. — Because of the small quantities of rain this winter Water Commissioner Zemach Yishai considers declaring a national water emergency. A reduction of about 10 per cent in the quotas for agriculture, industry and city use is planned.

With one third of March over and the weatherman forecasting dry weather till Thursday afternoon, Yishai is becoming pessimistic about heavy rains still falling this winter.

In an interview with *The Jerusalem Post* Yishai said that unless there are rains before April, he may have to increase the cuts in the quota from 10 to 15 per cent or more.

In some parts of the country the cuts may even be harsher during the summer months. Three areas which will probably be affected the most are the Carmel coastal area, Western Galilee and the Golan Heights, where the quota may be cut by 50 per cent. These areas are supplied not by the national water carrier but by wells, and the levels of these wells have become dangerously low. "We simply have no reserves of water to give to these areas," Yishai said.

Critics of Yishai say that a 10 per cent cut does not take into consideration the excessive and above-quota use of water during the dry winter months, which means that in reality the cuts will be less than 10 per cent. Yishai counters that there has not been a great overuse of water quotas this winter.

In years with low rainfall the Wa-

ter Commissioner is likely to come under crossfire. The farmers, on one side, demand bigger quotas, while conservationists call for his resignation because he is not cutting down on water quotas.

One of the strongest opponents to Yishai's policies is former MK Yossef Tamir, now chairman of the Life and Environment umbrella organization on ecology. Tamir claims that unless immediate steps are taken, the next generation will simply not have enough drinking water. Tamir says that the Water Commissioner is not using his extensive powers wisely.

Yishai, a former moshavnik himself, is a soft-spoken, reserved person, who never seems to lose his temper. He admits that the lawmakers gave him a lot of power. "It would be easy for me to dictate to the farmers how much water to use by issuing regulations. But the trick is to persuade them to use less water," he says.

"I have been in office for five years and what I have tried to do is regulate the yearly use of our present water potential and not to overuse it, so that coming generations will also have water."

He gets angry at the mention of critics who say he is not doing anything to reduce the country's hydrological overdraft. "I'm not God, only he can replenish our overdrawn water resources with several good years of rain."

He is also critical of those who try to decide on agricultural policies on the basis of the available water. "It is

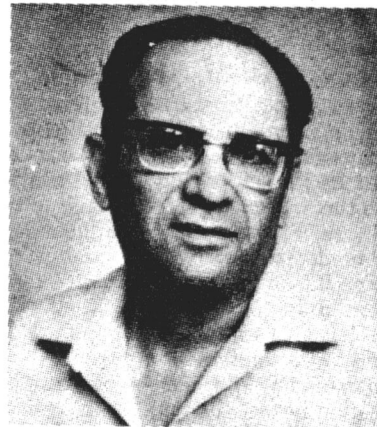
difficult to decide whether to plant citrus trees or not, because of the water they use.

"I have decided upon red lines in the overuse of water, and it is not easy to keep the farmers from reaching these lines, but it is impossible to cut down on water use in order to pay off the hydrological overdraft."

Yishai tries to sound optimistic about the future. Money is needed to develop additional water resources. According to our long-range plans we are not going to increase the supply of water for farmers above the present level of 1.35 billion cubic metres a year. Just the same, there will be a steady increase in the use of water by the industrial and city sectors, he says.

"Where will this additional water come from? We will soon complete the third water line to the Negev at a cost of \$100 million and will pump an additional 100m. cubic metres of purified sewage water for agriculture purposes for farmers who will then have to give back 100m. cubic metres of good drinking water.

"Another thing is that I have been in office only five years. Some of my



Zemach Yishai

actions will only bear fruit in another five to ten years. For example, I have ordered a halt to pumping water from a number of wells in the coastal region. It will take about 15 years before we will see the results of this restraint and may be able to renew pumping."

The Water Commissioner now holds meetings to discuss the possibility of lowering the price of water in the wake of lower prices of oil and electricity.