

Knesset debate of the week

Water wrangle

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The urban population may be paying sharply increased water bills if a plea made this week in the Knesset by MK Yitzhak Artzi (Alignment) goes unheeded.

Artzi is angry about a new water regulation that requires cities to collect a special water rate to cover the cost of renovations to the country's outdated water pipe network.

The municipalities, he noted, had refused to implement the order. They claim it is not their job to act as tax collector for what is in essence a national obligation. In any case, domestic water rates are due to be raised considerably.

Artzi was speaking during a Knesset debate on the dire state of the water economy, especially after the drought of last winter.

The debate divided the plenum sharply, not according to political affiliation, but along the lines of town versus country.

At only point, there was a chorus from the farmers, kibbutz and moshav members alike: "It's the nation's agriculture; it belongs to all of us, not just the farmers."

The strongest attack from the urban sector came from the Likud's Gideon Gadot, who was specially incensed about the amount of water used by cotton farmers. "We're not exporting cotton, we're exporting water," he insisted.

Gadot's attack on the farmers caused Charlie Biton (Democratic Front for Peace and Equality) to interject: "What do you want, should we all rely on the national lottery to make us money!" (Gadot heads Mifal Hapayis, the state lottery.)

Though the debate took place before Wednesday's gloomy forecasts of a possible drought year, members did address themselves seriously to urging that the government exploit all ways not just to save water, but to create new sources.

More attention should be paid to cloud-seeding, desalination, recycling of waste and sewage, and prospecting for water, members said. Artzi urged that potential water sources be mapped nationally, as are possible sites for oil drilling.

Shinui's Mordechai Virshubski urged that long-range planning and overall responsibility for water not be left in the hands of the national water council as presently constituted. Instead it should be transfer-

red to either the Energy and Infrastructure Ministry, or the Economic and Planning Ministry.

This, he said, would remove it from a body that is dominated by agriculturists and has too partisan an approach. He also scored excessive subsidizing of water.

Replying to the debate, Deputy Agriculture Ministry Avraham Katz-Oz regretted that power and authority were often given without the financial resources to give them meaning. The water commissioner had not been equipped with "teeth" to punish those who polluted the nation's water, nor did the local authorities have enough money to treat pollutant wastes.

Money was at the root of the water problem, Katz-Oz said. But Gadot, he said, had counted into the costs of water all the costs of infrastructure. This was not fair and was a specifically Israeli phenomenon. Water infrastructure should be a national responsibility, he said.

Israeli farmers, he said, paid more heavily for water than in any other country. His ministry reckoned that if infrastructure costs were deducted, water to the agricultural sector should cost 14-15 U.S. cents per cubic metre. Farmers were charged 10 cents. In countries which compete agriculturally with Israel, the costs ranged from 1.5 to 2.5 cents per cu.m.

Katz-Oz also dismissed Gadot's criticism of the cotton farmers. Water they used was "marginal" water, he said, which had little other use.

True, the price of cotton on the world markets had declined recently, but so had those of all commodities, he said. Israel was paying less for those commodities it imports. Thus the drop in the price of cotton was balanced out by the cheaper imports.

Cotton had been a valuable export, the pride of Israeli agriculture and would yet come into its own again, Katz-Oz predicted. The investment had been enormous and was not to be thrown away.

The Treasury, said Katz-Oz, kept a tight rein on water investment and was holding up plans to recycle the immense quantities of water assigned for domestic use. A plan that would yield 40-70 million cu.m. is pending because of budgetary shortages.

He said that the agricultural sector was the only one that had carried out the water cuts demanded last year.