

Threat to water resources

THE WATER Commission has not lived up to its responsibility to protect the country's water reserves from over-pumping. As a result, the quality and quantity of the country's future water reserves have been seriously endangered, the State Comptroller's report says.

The report documents how the commission decided how much water to allocate, using a figure which was 240 million cubic metres greater than the actual amount of water available. This was because the working figure included recycled sewage water from projects that had not yet been completed. At the same time, however, 70 per cent of the farmers who were getting recycled sewage water from completed purification plants did not have to give up any of their fresh water quotas, even though the whole purpose of the recycling was to reduce the amount of high quality water used by farmers.

Since 1970, water reserves have been sacrificed to answer the immediate needs of agriculture, the report says. The resulting damage may be partially irreversible because salt water has penetrated and contaminated portions of the severely depleted and extremely important aquifers along the coastal plain.

As the fresh water levels in the aquifers dropped because of over-pumping, salt water and pollutants were able to penetrate at a much faster rate. The nitrate level of the

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water pumped from the coastal aquifer has doubled in the past 36 years, and 53 per cent of the coastal wells have nitrate levels that exceed

the health standards of most Western countries (45 mg/ltr.), the report says.

As for water quality, an aquifer that is pumped to too low a level can be invaded by salt water and rendered permanently unusable, the comptroller notes. In October 1986, the underground water reserves were lacking 2 billion cu.m. of water, the equivalent of the country's annual needs. The amount of water that could be drawn from the mountain and coastal underground reserves without the penetration of salt water being a serious risk, had essentially been used up.

Until the dire situation of 1986, the water commissioner had ignored experts' recommendations to freeze or reduce the farmers' water quotas.

"The water commissioner is responsible for the most important national treasure of our country," the report says. "It appears that, over the course of years, the country's water economy was managed in a way that didn't match the responsibility that accompanies the job."

The situation can be improved by raising the price of water nearer to the actual cost of water production, the comptroller said. The government currently makes up the differ-

ence between the consumer price and the actual cost, a sum which totalled NIS 56.7 million in the 1985 fiscal year.

In 1985, the comptroller notes, farmers were charged a maximum of 44 to 54 per cent of the actual cost.

The high level of subsidies has encouraged farms to raise crops that were not actually worth growing from the point of view of the national economy.

An avocado grower in the Jezreel Valley, for example, receives a return of 14 cents for every cubic metre of water he uses in an optimal harvest. The real cost is about 20 cents, the report says.

The farmer can only afford to grow avocados because of the subsidy. "In practice," the report says, "the price of water was never used as a device to regulate its use."

The State Comptroller recommends that the Water Commission immediately embark on a plan to replenish the country's endangered aquifers. The country also needs a clear and detailed masterplan that would bind all the parties involved in water planning, production and supply.