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# Study says world faces water crisis

It is likened to the '70s oil crunch. Causes range from irrigation to inefficient toilets.

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WASHINGTON — Burgeoning populations and aging technology have brought the world to the brink of a water crisis, an environmental think tank says.

In a study titled "Last Oasis," the Worldwatch Institute warned that the 1990s could see a water crunch similar to the oil crisis of the 1970s.

For two decades, per-capita water supplies have declined by one-third and people have been multiplying faster than irrigated lands can expand, said the study, which was released over the weekend.

Written by Worldwatch Vice President Sandra Postel and supported by a grant from the Ford Foundation, the study said, "This trend of declining irrigated land per person is historically new, and political leaders and development specialists have not yet fully grasped its consequences. Indeed, many have failed even to notice it."

Water-guzzling toilets, leaky pipes in the world's oldest cities, overly thirsty crops, government-subsidized irrigation and industries that gorge on water all contribute to the problem, Postel said.

The study also found that:

- Per-capita grain production has been falling roughly 1 percent a year since 1984, with the drop concentrated in developing countries.

- Construction of irrigation projects will be increasingly difficult in the future.

- Some irrigated lands will have to give up water to meet rapidly growing urban demands.

- The future is likely to see no more than a 1 percent annual increase in irrigated farmland, while the world's population is expected to increase by about 1.7 percent a year.

"With some 95 million people being added to the planet each year in the 1990s," Postel said, "new strategies will be needed to prevent the many emerging irrigation constraints from leading to food shortages."

The report said 26 countries with populations totaling more than 232 million — including 11 in Africa and nine in the Middle East — are now seriously water-deficient; high birth-rates exacerbate the problem.

By the year 2000, the population of Africa's water-scarce countries will climb to 300 million, while six of the nine Middle Eastern nations already facing shortages will see their populations double, the study said.

"Water scarcity will affect everything from prospects for peace in the Middle East to global food scarcity, the growth of cities and the location of industries," Postel said.

Her thesis is that rather than trying to increase the available water supply through building dams and digging wells, conservation and more efficient water use offer humanity its "last oasis."

The aging irrigation technologies used around the world are about 40 percent efficient, which means less than half the water diverted for agriculture actually reaches the crops for which it is intended.