

Overpopulated Beijing set to face water crisis

The water shortage in China's capital is set to reach a crisis point in 2010, when the population is expected to top 17 million - at least three million more than its resources can feed.

An optimistic estimation of Beijing's annual water supply is around 3.73 billion cubic meters in 2010, taking into account Yangtze River water supplied by the country's ambitious south-to-north water diversion project.

Yet the disposable volume will not be more than 3.26 billion cubic meters excluding at least 470 million cubic meters needed to maintain the city's ecological system, says a report in China Economic Weekly.

'The total number of people this water can feed depends on living standards and water consumption for each unit of gross domestic product,' it said.

Beijing's per capita GDP averaged \$5,547.6 last year, with 50.1 cubic meters of water consumed for each 10,000 yuan (\$1,250) of GDP.

Based on this formula, Beijing's water resources were able to feed a maximum of 14.36 million people in 2005, the report said.

But Beijing had more than 15 million permanent residents and four million migrants at the end of last year, and the consequences of overpopulation include the continuous decline of groundwater and a worsening environment.

In line with China's blueprint to improve energy efficiency by 2010, the municipal government has vowed to increase its per capita GDP to \$8,000-8,500 and cut water consumption for each 10,000 yuan of GDP to 40.08 cubic meters, down 20 percent from the 2005 volume.

If these goals are to be fulfilled, Beijing will be able to accommodate between 13.37 million and 14.20 million people in 2010. But demographers say the city's permanent population would have exceeded 17.13 million by then.

With the current baby boom triggered by superstitious beliefs that people born in the Chinese years of the dog and pig - this year and next - are lucky, experts have little hope for a slowdown in Beijing's population growth.

In order to feed an additional three million people with its limited water resources, experts say Beijing needs to further slash water consumption for each 10,000 yuan of GDP to 33, or even 31 cubic meters.

But that would result in water rationing and higher prices, affecting the quality of the average resident's life.

One approach to cap the city's population is to relocate some people.

With less land available for real estate development and soaring house prices, some people are

indeed forced to move to areas on the border of Beijing - Tianjin and Hebei Province.

The city government has also implicitly encouraged people, retirees in particular, to live in Hebei. But those who do often complain of isolation, with few nearby friends and little access to public services such as banking, supermarkets and buses.

The report added that the key to containing Beijing's bulging population would be to reduce the city's reliance on the population size in economic growth.

A decreased reliance on the working population means increased productivity, in which Beijing lags far behind Shanghai. Beijing's productivity is only one eighth the level of developed countries and around a third of South Korea's.

Meanwhile, Beijing is also pinning its hopes on new policies of the central government to seek more balanced national economic growth and make other provinces as appealing as Beijing in terms of opportunities for education and employment.

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