

Study: Upgrade water treatment now to keep water affordable



Limor Edrey

Date palms in the Jordan Valley.

By Zafrir Rinat

If Israel does not properly plan its water usage over the next two decades, much of its greenery will disappear because rising water prices will make many types of agriculture unprofitable, causing large tracts of agricultural land to remain uncultivated, a new study warns.

The study explained that agriculture currently accounts for a significant part of Israel's greenery. But as the country becomes more and more dependent upon desalination and intensive sewage treatment for its water supply, water prices will inevitably rise and many crops will become unprofitable.

"It will not be possible to grow alfalfa in the Hula Valley, dates in the Jordan Valley, maintain fish ponds in the Beit She'an Valley or orchards in the

Sharon at water prices close to the cost of desalination," said the study's author, Giora Shaham.

And while much agriculture relies on treated sewage rather than fresh water, this, too, is likely to become more expensive, said the study, which was issued by the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology's Samuel Neaman Institute as part of a project on "National Environmental Priorities."

Shaham, a water engineer who has been responsible for long-range planning at both the Water Authority and the Israel Nature and Parks Authority, argued that given the social and environmental importance of preserving the country's green spaces, the government should subsidize upgraded treatment plants, rather than passing the costs on to farmers.

In any case, he argued, upgrading these plants

is necessary to rehabilitate polluted rivers, since current treatment plants do not purify waste to the degree necessary. Thus if Israel neglects the necessary investments in its water economy, the rehabilitation project will also be stymied.

In the past, Shaham has proposed that desalinated water, which is the most expensive kind, be sold only to urban consumers so that cheaper types of water could be reserved for farmers and nature reserves.

On another issue, Shaham noted that privatizing water infrastructure has failed in many places around the world, and warned that the planned privatization of the Mekorot Water Company could undermine the public interest unless the buyer is required to continue supplying reasonably-priced water to green areas.

Yet another threat to the country's water supply, Shaham said, is international pressure on Israel to give more water to the Palestinians, and also to Syria, as part of any diplomatic agreement with Damascus. The latter, he said, could reduce the amount of water flowing into Lake Kinneret by 40 to 100 million cubic meters a year – which makes the development of alternative water sources, such as desalination and purified wastewater, even more important.

But for all his criticisms, Shaham also wrote that Israel has one of the most efficient water management systems in the world. An international study conducted this year by a UN agency, he noted, put Israel in second place in this category among the 21 Mediterranean Basin countries, ahead of states such as France, Spain and Greece.