

World water demand 'will double'

By Robin Pash

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WORLD demand for water will double by 2050, with a third of the globe's population already facing shortages of the precious resource, an international expert has warned.

That will also send the cost of the "blue gold" through the roof, but it is unlikely to match the pricing spiral experienced by crude oil.

Dr Frank Rijsberman, a Dutch scientist who heads the eminent International Water Management Institute, said about 2.5 billion people - most of them in Asia - already faced scarcity of water.

He delivered a daunting assessment of the world's current and future water needs to the Crawford Fund's annual development conference in Canberra today.

But he also said there was plenty of water in the world - how it was managed would be the key to meeting demand.

"The point is, water scarcity is a choice. You're not necessarily water scarce because there is no rain," he told the conference.

"You're water scarce because you're doing something with the water, such as growing food and exporting it."

In another paper delivered to the conference, the International Food Policy Research Institute warned that failure to change current trends in water policy and investment would strip 350 million tonnes from the world's annual food production by 2025.

The figure is more than the entire grain crop in the United States.

Dr Rijsberman said the total amount of water needed for the world would double between now and 2050.

That would likely lead to big price rises - at least double, possibly treble current levels.

But the increases were unlikely to match oil prices, currently approaching \$US80 a barrel.

Dr Rijsberman highlighted huge differences in the global pricing of water, saying "designer" products like Perrier bottled water already topped the price of oil.

Bottom-end prices for Australian wine, he noted, were currently cheaper than domestic water, as the wine industry experienced an oversupply.

For domestic use, Australians currently paid between \$1 and \$2 per cubic metre for water.

But prices were already much higher in many developed nations, such as Germany, which paid about \$10 per cubic metre for its domestic water.

With water a big issue in the current Queensland election campaign, Dr Rijsberman said the resource would become an increasingly significant factor in the rise and fall of governments.

State election results in India, for example, were frequently determined by water and energy prices, he said.

Residents of the drought-stricken Queensland city of Toowoomba recently voted against including recycled effluent in the drinking water supply - the first poll of its kind in Australia.

Recycling was inevitable, Dr Rijsberman said, but there was no rush to include it in drinking stocks.

Using waste water for purposes like irrigating crops should be a higher priority, he said.

"Probably the people of Toowoomba are right. You don't have to drink it," Dr Rijsberman said.

"There are a lot of other things you can do before you start drinking it, but that we'll have to recycle it is pretty obvious."

Crawford Fund chairman Neil Andrew, a former Speaker of the House of Representatives, agreed water would play a growing role in political outcomes.