



Leaders in Environmental Management

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Faecal pollution threat to SA

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Mexico City - Faecal pollution from human settlements is a big threat to groundwater reserves in South Africa, says the department of water affairs.

Some schemes utilising groundwater had been shut down, and others were being closely monitored as a result of this pollution, the department's manager for information programmes, Eberhard Braune, told Sapa.

Speaking after making a presentation on groundwater protection at the Fourth World Water Forum in Mexico City, he said groundwater in South Africa prior to 1994 had been classified as private water.

"The state was not interested in it... but when the new government came in and said it wanted water for poverty alleviation - to wipe out the big backlogs in basic services - suddenly the importance of ground water shot up. In a matter of 10 years, from being a private resource in law, it (ground water) has become the resource that feeds 65% of our communities, especially in rural areas.

"It obviously is a highly strategic resource, and that is why, suddenly, ministers who have to meet these Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) realise the importance of groundwater," he said.

The MDGs were about bringing domestic water supply and sanitation to the whole population and for that groundwater was critically important.

However, pollution of groundwater in South Africa was a growing problem.

"We have not yet reached the stage of over-exploitation, such as occurred in India... They have reached the next phase of using it for small-farm irrigation and so forth. We want to go that route, and therefore we have to be very careful, but at this stage pollution is the biggest problem.

Polluted

"Even in the schemes we've put in over the past 10 years to meet those MDGs, many we have to watch. Some have been taken out of commission because they are polluted. In this regard, the biggest, most widespread problem is definitely domestic, and therefore faecal pollution."

Braune cited the example of Delmas, and the outbreak of cholera in that region last year.

"A small town, but suddenly a major political incident - (the result of) poor land management on a highly-permeable dolomitic aquifer."

Braune stressed the importance of groundwater in Southern Africa, saying that - according to recent figures - between 60% and 90% of domestic water supply in the sub-continent was from groundwater.

"Ground water occurs everywhere in Africa, but its occurrence is old, mainly in hard rock... the yields of these hard-rock formations is usually low to medium.

"Certain aquifers, such as the dolomitic aquifers in South Africa and those below the Zambian capital... these are the prime aquifers. But they are exceptions. The general occurrence are those that are hard-rock based and low-yielding, but they are extremely important," he said.