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Plan for China's Water Crisis Spurs Concern



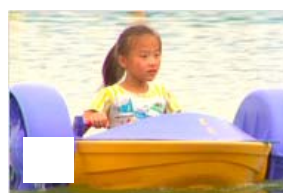
Gilles Sabrie for The New York Times

The project will divert six trillion gallons of water a year from the Yangtze, seen from Wuhan, Hubei Province. More Photos »

By EDWARD WONG Published: June 1, 2011

DANJIANGKOU, China — North China is dying.

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Sending Polluted Water North



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Slaking North China's Thirst

A chronic drought is ravaging farmland. The Gobi Desert is inching south. The Yellow River, the so-called birthplace of Chinese civilization, is so polluted it can no longer supply drinking water. The rapid growth of megacities — 22 million people in Beijing and 12 million in Tianjin alone — has drained underground aquifers that took millenniums to fill.

Not atypically, the Chinese government has a grand and expensive solution: Divert at least six trillion gallons of water each year hundreds of miles from the other great Chinese river, the Yangtze, to slake the thirst of the north China plain and its 440 million people.

The engineering feat, called the South-North Water Diversion Project, is China's most ambitious attempt to subjugate nature. It would be like channeling water from the Mississippi River to meet the drinking needs of Boston, New York and Washington. Its \$62 billion price tag is twice that of the Three Gorges Dam, which is the world's largest hydroelectric project. And not unlike that

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project, which Chinese officials last month admitted had “urgent problems,” the water diversion scheme is increasingly mired in concerns about its cost, its environmental impact and the sacrifices poor people in the provinces are told to make for those in richer cities.

Three artificial channels from the Yangtze would transport precious water from the south, which itself is increasingly afflicted by droughts; the region is suffering its worst one in 50 years. The project’s human cost is staggering — along the middle route, which starts here in Hubei Province at a gigantic reservoir and snakes 800 miles to Beijing, about 350,000 villagers are being relocated to make way for the canal. Many are being resettled far from their homes and given low-grade

farmland; in Hubei, thousands of people have been moved to the grounds of a former prison.

“Look at this dead yellow earth,” said Li Jiaying, 67, a hunched woman hobbling to her new concrete home clutching a sickle and a bundle of dry sticks for firewood. “Our old home wasn’t even being flooded for the project and we were asked to leave. No one wanted to leave.”

About 150,000 people had been resettled by this spring. Many more will follow. A recent front-page article in People’s Daily, the Communist Party’s mouthpiece, said the project “has entered a key period of construction.”

Some Chinese scientists say the diversion could destroy the ecology of the southern rivers, making them as useless as the Yellow River. The government has neglected to do proper impact studies, they say. There are precedents in the United States. Lakes in California were damaged and destroyed when the Owens River was diverted in the early 20th century to build Los Angeles.

Here, more than 14 million people in Hubei would be affected if the project damaged the Han River, the tributary of the Yangtze where the middle route starts, said Du Yun, a geographer at the Chinese Academy of Sciences in Wuhan, the provincial capital.

Officials in provinces south of Beijing and Tianjin have privately raised objections and are haggling over water pricing and compensation; midlevel officials in water-scarce Hebei Province are frustrated that four reservoirs in their region have sent more than 775 million cubic meters, or 205 billion gallons, of water to Beijing since September 2008 in an “emergency” supplement to the middle route.

Overseers of the eastern route, which is being built alongside an ancient waterway for barges called the Grand Canal, have found that the drinking water to be brought to Tianjin from the Yangtze is so polluted that 426 sewage treatment plants have to be built; water pollution control on the route takes up 44 percent of the \$5 billion investment, according to Xinhua, the official news agency. The source water from the Han River on the middle route is cleaner. But the main channel will cross 205 rivers and streams in the industrial heartland of China before reaching Beijing.

“When water comes to Beijing, there’s the danger of the water not being safe to drink,” said Dai Qing, an environmental advocate who has written critically about the Three Gorges Dam.

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Li Bibo, Jonathan Kaiman and Jimmy Wang contributed research from Beijing.

A version of this article appeared in print on June 2, 2011, on page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: To Slake Thirst of North, China Looks South.



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