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U.S. Ignores Growing Global and Domestic Water Crisis

Nation Could Reap Huge Political, Social, and Economic Gains From A New Focus on Water Issues

Water problems continue to grow both here in the United States, in other wealthy nations, and in the developing world. But instead of leading global and national efforts to safeguard this critical resource, the United States lacks a coherent and strategic approach to water issues. This affects the nation's reputation, business success, and security.

The good news is that U.S. involvement could make a huge difference. And, if we use an approach that combines smart economic assistance, technology development, and efficient water planning and use, we can make real progress without spending huge amounts of money. That was the central message of a talk given today by Dr. Peter H. Gleick at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars to mark the 2004 release of "The World's Water: The Biennial Report on Freshwater Resources" (Island Press).

"Global and U.S. water problems continue to grow, but the United States lacks a coherent strategy," noted Dr. Peter H. Gleick, President of the Pacific Institute, lead author of "The World's Water: 2004-2005" and a 2003 MacArthur Fellow. "The good news is, with a modest investment of money and brain-power we can produce major social and political returns while making progress on critical water issues."

Over 1 billion people struggle without access to clean water and an estimated 2.1 million people perish every year for want of it. Climate change, pollution, and overuse threaten water resources even in wealthy nations. The world spends \$300 billion a year on agricultural subsidies, \$50 billion a year on bottled water, and only \$3 billion a year in foreign aid for water supply and sanitation projects. Yet \$10 to 20 billion a year would be enough to provide basic human needs for water for all.

"Our failure to help those in the developing world gain access to clean water must surely rank as one of the greatest development failures of the past century. And the failure of the federal government to develop a comprehensive water policy has allowed small problems to grow bigger. Part of the challenge is to break with our outdated way of thinking about water."

Gleick also called for a National Water Commission to develop a comprehensive national water policy, including the elimination over time of federal subsidies that encourage wasting and polluting water, investment in new technology for efficient use and water treatment, and a research program focused on reducing the risks of droughts and floods. Such a policy should also include new national water efficiency standards – like the very



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successful EPA “Energy Star” program – better monitoring and regulation of bottled water, and a revised approach to river basin management.

Our approach to international water issues must also change. “The U.S. contribution to international efforts to solve water problems is paltry, and badly spent,” said Gleick. A modest increase in spending on global water problems could yield huge benefits in global economic productivity, health, and security. We have the opportunity to help educate foreign water managers, provide diplomatic assistance to regions in conflict, acknowledge the human right to water, and engage in a global water-health initiative that emphasizes appropriate, community-scale investment. The economic and security returns to the country would be matched by global goodwill.

“These are, and should be, non-partisan issues,” continued Gleick. “The perils of inaction are high, but the rewards of creating a strategic, coherent policy towards water at home and abroad are many.”

The Pacific Institute is an independent, nonpartisan research organization studying issues at the intersection of development, environment and security.

More information about “The World’s Water” can be found online:
http://www.pacinst.org/press_center/the_worlds_water_2004-2005