

Global water crisis and solutions captured in acclaimed Running Dry documentary

CSIR President and CEO, Dr Sibusiso Sibisi, with Running Dry narrator Jane Seymour, producer Jim Thebaut, and Sir Paul Lever of Thames Water (back)

Water is essential to all aspects of life, yet 99% of the water on earth is unsafe or unavailable to drink. Some 1,2 billion people globally lack safe water to consume and 2,5 billion do not have access to adequate sanitation. It's estimated that 9 500 children die world-wide every day from water-related diseases and a lack of clean drinking water. Water is an economic issue as it is essential for poverty reduction, agriculture, food and energy production.

It is estimated that only 21% of South African households have access to piped indoor water. In the rural areas, over 80% have no access to water or sanitation and most must fetch water on a daily basis. The lack of access to safe water and adequate sanitation continues to be a threat to human health. More than 50% of Africans suffer from water-related diseases such as cholera and infant diarrhoea according to the UN Millennium Project (2005). In South Africa, for children under the age of five, diarrhoea is the third most common cause of death. Estimates of treatment of diarrhoea cost South Africans R3,5 billion every year. Improvements in wastewater disposal, protection of water sources and treatment of water supplies can reduce the incidence of water-related diseases in developing countries.

Achieving the Millennium Development Goals in terms of water supply and sanitation would bring economic benefits ranging from US\$3 to 34 per US\$1 invested. Additional improvement of water quality and improved access to water and sanitation would lead to a benefit of US\$5 to 60 per every US\$1 invested. The greatest proportion of the benefits expected would be accrued to the poorest regions.

Bettina Genthe, water expert and CSIR spokesperson at the media briefing, with Jane Seymour and Jim Thebaut

To increase awareness of the global water crises, the South African première of "Running Dry", a 90-minute documentary that focuses on the global water crisis, was screened at the CSIR in November 2006. Writer, producer and director of the documentary, Jim Thebaut, and the narrator, Jane Seymour, attended the première. Mrs Lindiwe Hendricks, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry, hosted the event and delivered the keynote address, while Dr Sibusiso Sibisi, CSIR President and CEO, welcomed the guests. The event was organised by the CSIR and Thames Water of the UK.

The purpose of the documentary is a global call to action regarding the evolving world water humanitarian crisis. "Running Dry" sets out to raise awareness regarding the worsening global humanitarian water crisis, a message that is particularly relevant in South Africa. The film focuses on life-and-death crises with water and sanitation in China, India, South Asia, South Africa and the Middle East. The film highlights the severity of the crisis and presents a spectrum of solutions available to solve it.

Dr Anthony Turton of the CSIR was one of the external reviewers of the documentary, and Thebaut's southern African advisor on water issues. "I am most impressed with the film. Jim Thebaut has handled a complex issue with sensitivity and insight. In my view he has captured the essence of the problem in a way that enables a broader audience of non-specialists to understand and thus intervene in a variety of different ways. This film empowers the viewer to get involved in some way or another, even if it is just by lobbying their local political leadership. I am proud to have been involved professionally with 'Running

Dry' and only did so because of my personal respect for Jim Thebaut," comments Turton.

The project was inspired by former US Senator Paul Simon's powerful book, "Tapped Out". Presentations of the documentary are taking place on an international basis in conjunction with in-depth discussions regarding the crisis for the purpose of educating policy makers, educators, students and the general public.

The CSIR focuses attention on assessing and managing water resources to ensure an optimal supply of quality water to users, while ensuring the integrity of the resource so that future economic growth and prosperity can still become a reality in spite of these environmental constraints. CSIR research addresses issues regarding water resource governance, aquatic ecosystems, groundwater sciences and issues related to water and human health. For example, one project in the water resource governance research group looks at developing a methodology to assess the implications of South Africa's trade negotiations for water at a strategic level, by determining the implications of new trade agreements.

The groundwater sciences research group has undertaken research to investigate new methods of assessing the vulnerability of groundwater to contamination from the surface, based on the properties of the unsaturated zone, soil and aquifer. The group has pioneered areas of research on artificial recharge, geophysical characterisation of aquifers, understanding the geochemical processes in semi-arid areas, and groundwater links to ecosystems.

The aquatic ecosystems group has, together with the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry, the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism and the Water Research Commission, set up the National River Health Programme and State of River Reporting as a collaborative programme to support environmental decision-making and assess management performance regarding river health.

The water and human health research group recently participated in a European Union research programme to assess policy issues relating to water quality and human health in rural areas. The aim is to assess whether water policy should be focused on point-of-use as opposed to point-of-supply. Research is also being conducted to assess the effects of water quality on individuals with compromised immune systems as a result of HIV/Aids.

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