

WATER IS NOT A LUXURY

Support the Human Right to Water

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U.N. Special Report on Water Zeroes in on California Issues, Problems

Sacramento, Calif., August 30, 2011... California's failure to provide clean, safe drinking water to its residents has captured the attention of the United Nations in a special report released this month. Reporting on her mission to the United States last winter, U.N. Special Rapportuer on the Human Right to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation Catarina de Albuquerque cited a host of worrisome conditions in the Golden State.

"Ensuring the rights to water and sanitation for all requires a paradigm shift towards new designs and approaches that promote human rights, that are affordable and that create more value in terms of public health improvements, community development, and global ecosystem protection," de Albuquerque wrote.

While her mission and report touched on issues around the nation, the bulk of her findings addressed problems in California, specifically the San Joaquin Valley, where she cites "enormous challenges" particularly with nitrate contamination of drinking water. While occurring naturally, nitrate levels are elevated by crop fertilizers and animal manure and are known to harm respiratory and reproductive systems as well as the kidney, spleen and thyroid.

"Because it is difficult to assign responsibility for this type of pollution (non-point source pollution), no one is obliged to pay for the clean-up costs. In these circumstances, the affected community inevitably bears these costs," she reports.

This is especially concerning, she pointed out, because groundwater, which is vulnerable to nitrate contamination, serves as the primary source of drinking water for almost 90 percent of Central Valley residents. In Tulare County, for instance, she reports that approximately 20 percent of the small public water systems are unable to meet the nitrate maximum contaminant level (MCL) on a regular basis and another 20 percent are over half the nitrate MCL.

“The goal of universal access to clean and safe water has yet to be attained. Infants, older persons, persons with certain medical conditions and other vulnerable groups remain at risk from exposure to water that does not meet federal standards. Moreover, hundreds of substances found in water remain unregulated, and some sources of water, namely private drinking-water supplies, are also unregulated,” she wrote.

The Community Water Center in Visalia, which advocates for safe drinking water in the Central Valley, is especially familiar with this reality. “Hardworking farmworker families with annual incomes well below the poverty line are often forced to pay twice for water – once for a monthly water bill for water they can’t drink and then again when they are forced to seek alternative water sources, usually from neighboring towns,” says Maria Herrera, the Center’s community outreach coordinator.

The U.N. noted this reality in their report and pointed out that affected households in these small rural areas are paying as much as 20 percent of their income to water and sanitation.

“While there is no federally recognized right to safe drinking water and sanitation, individual states have taken the initiative to consecrate this right,” de Albuquerque says.

Massachusetts and Pennsylvania have a right to clean water in their constitutions and the United States joined international consensus in 2010, recognizing the human right for water and sanitation. In California, the State Legislature is presently considering AB 685 (Eng-D Monterey Park), the Human Right to Water Measure. If passed, proponents say this would be a fundamental first step to addressing many of the recommendations and concerns in the U.N. report.

“A holistic, systemic approach is required, whereby the water sector is not viewed in isolation from the agricultural, chemical, industrial and energy sectors. The absence of political will inevitably means poor planning and scarce funding, and ultimately leads to pollution that jeopardizes water quality and increases costs,” de Albuquerque says.

The U.N. mission was coordinated by the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC). For additional information on the U.N. mission and corresponding recommendations, contact Patricia Jones, UUSC Environmental Justice Program Manager at (617) 301 4393 or email pjones@uusc.org. The full U.N. report is available online at: http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/18session/A-HRC-18-33-Add4_en.pdf.

The human right to water bill package, which includes AB 685, is co-sponsored by the California Center for Public Health Advocacy; California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation; Catholic Charities Diocese of Stockton; Clean Water Action; Community Water Center; Environmental Justice Coalition for Water; Food and Water Watch; Southern California Watershed Alliance; Unitarian Universalist Legislative Ministry Action Network, CA; Unitarian Universalist Service Committee; Urban Semillas, and Winnemem Wintu Tribe.