Council heads from Israel and the Palestinian Authority are promoting joint projects to protect common water resources

One of the subjects presented at a joint conference was the serious sanitation problems in the Gaza Strip as a result of its untreated waste reservoirs. The World Bank, USAID and the PA are struggling to recruit investors and donors to build waste treatment facilities in the Gaza Strip and West Bank.

Merav Ankori, Globes, May 10

At a conference over the weekend, Israeli and Palestinian council heads discussed local cooperation to prevent pollution of joint water resources. Several ideas were raised to treat the sewage in the PA and Israel.

"In the context of the ongoing drought, the threat of pollution to the mountain aquifer (Israel's largest water reserve and the PA's only one) is worsening and conflict with the effort to save every drop of water," said Gideon Bromberg, the Israeli director of Friends of the Earth Middle East. The meeting focused on the Bsor River, which begins in the Hebron Mountains and ends in Wadi Ara. This case is relevant both to Israel and the Palestinians who are both up and down stream.

The World Bank representative who participated in the conference noted the serious defects in the management and development of the water economy to supply the needs of both peoples: the failure to supply the amount of water needed by the Palestinians as well as protecting the joint water resources against the daily growing sources of pollution.

He presented the serious sanitation problems resulting from untreated sewage reservoirs in the Gaza Strip. The World Bank, USAID and the PA are having trouble getting investors and donors to build waste treatment facilities in the Gaza Strip and West Bank because of the delays and dangers of investing in the area.

Even when the money is available, Israel's failure to provide permits to develop projects delays and sometimes completely cancels the execution of projects. For example, the World Bank is funding the rehabilitation and upgrading of the waste treatment reservoir at Beit Lahiya in the northern Gaza Strip, but Israel is preventing the passage of equipment and materials needed to complete the work. In 2007 the reservoir collapsed and flooded entire streets, causing the death of seven residents and the spread of diseases.

Chaim Yelin, head of the Eshkol Regional Council, suggested building a facility to treat sewage from the Gaza Strip in his council's territory. "I am not willing to help build infrastructures for an entity that does not even recognize Israel's right to exist, but we can help treat sewage from the Gaza Strip in our territory, and the treated water can serve to expand agriculture in the area," he said.

The pollution problems along the route of the Bsor were presented at the conference: untreated household and industrial sewage from Hebron (10-15 thousand m³ per day), sewage from the settlement of Meitar and old pollution from Ramat Hovav that is washed into the river with the floods. Representatives of the drainage authority and basin administration noted that construction of the facility to treat the Hebron sewage near Shoket Junction is near completion, but if the dumping of toxic sewage and the waste of the stone mills without preliminary treatment continues, the facility will not be able to treat the sewage and the filters and precipitation pools will quickly be clogged.

Nader Khatib, the Palestinian director of Friends of the Earth, said the Palestinians also have an interest to treat the waste: except for protection of the joint water resources and recycling the sewage for agriculture, the flowing sewage causes smell hazards, mosquitoes and is a source of disease spread. "Plans to concentrate the polluting industries in Hebron in the C area near the town were not approved by the civil administration (the Israeli authorities), which prevents the separate treatment of the pollution from the leather tanning and sawmill industries," he said.
The participants in the meeting went on a tour of the "neighbors' path" along the Bsor River up to the outskirts of the Gaza Strip; from there they looked at the village of Ibsan, where extensive activity is underway to conserve and save water as part of the "water and good neighbors" project, taking place in 21 communities in Israel, the PA and Jordan. The coordinator of the project in the village told the conference participants about the projects in the village for the environment and the protection of the water resources, and, along with the rest of the conference participants, expressed his hope and desire for peace and cooperation to protect the water resources and the environment for the benefit of all of the residents of this land.