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Water Resources

Jordanian Representative to Water Committee Calls for Dead Sea Industrial Water Fees

JERUSALEM—Companies extracting minerals from the Dead Sea should be paying for their water use, a Jordanian representative to a panel overseeing Jordanian and Israeli water issues told a sustainability symposium.

“There is no other way to say it, the Dead Sea is dead,” Saad Abu Hamour, the Jordanian head of the Israel-Jordan Joint Water Committee, said during the April 23 event in the seaside town of Ashdod, south of Tel Aviv. The committee was created as part of the country’s 1994 peace treaty with Israel.

The low flow of Jordan River water into the Dead Sea, together with the commercial extraction of minerals like potash, bromine, and magnesium through intensive evaporation methods, are causing the sea’s water level to drop by one meter every year, he said.

“Industry in both countries is supplied with water from the Dead Sea for free, and this situation cannot go on,” he said, noting that the Jordanians, Israelis, and Palestinians have agreed the sea’s rehabilitation should be a regional project.

No Israeli representative to the Joint Committee spoke at the symposium. However, Gidon Bromberg, Israeli director of Friends of the Earth-Middle East, agreed with Abu Hamour in his remarks.

“Industry must pay for the water it consumes the same way citizens do,” Bromberg said, noting that Friends of the Earth representatives in both countries are lobbying their ministries and parliaments to introduce industrial water fees, engage in government monitoring of water use, require water efficiency measures, and conduct research into alternative technologies for mineral extraction.

The symposium was organized by the Ashdod Municipality, the Ministry of Environmental Protection, Friends of the Earth Middle East, and the Hebrew daily newspaper *Haaretz*.

No Incentives to Conserve. Israel’s Dead Sea Works and Jordan’s Arab Potash Co. pay a royalty for the minerals they extract, but they have no incentive to conserve water as they extract those minerals, given that they have unlimited Dead Sea water access free of charge, Friends of the Earth said in a statement. “On the contrary, the faster the rate of evaporation and production, the greater the profit margin for Dead Sea industries. This situation enables the industries to exter-

nalize the environmental costs of their operation which encourages further demise of the Dead Sea ecosystem.”

Both companies are partially owned by the Potash Corporation of Saskatchewan, Canada.

A World Bank feasibility study on the Red-Dead Sea water conveyance estimates that industry extracts 650 cubic meters of water from the Dead Sea each year, and returns 248 cubic meters, for an annual loss of about 400 cubic meters.

According to company statements, Arab Potash Co. in 2012 produced 1.8 million tons of potash from Dead Sea waters, and Dead Sea Works extracted 2 million-4 million tons of potash, 280,000 tons of bromine, and an undisclosed amount of magnesium.

“Abu Hamour’s statements are a real breakthrough, and the industry should be concerned,” Bromberg told BNA April 30. “With the support of the Joint Water Committee, regulatory change—to impose fees, require licenses, and implement government monitoring—is a real possibility. And that will create an economic incentive for the industry to invest in alternatives, such as membrane technology.”

Jordan faces additional water problems, Abu Hamour told the symposium.

Jordanian Problems Cited. “Jordan is sustained by rain waters,” he said, and water supply is irregular. “In some areas, water runs in the taps only once a week, so there are storage tanks on almost every roof in the country and citizens often use self-harvested rain waters,” he said.

Jordan’s general water shortage has been exacerbated during the past year by the influx of refugees from Syria, now living in refugee camps in northern Jordan. “More and more refugees arrive each day,” said Abu Hamour, “and it currently seems this deluge will go on, making it even harder for us to supply water to both refugees and our own citizens.”

The crisis could be eased, he said, by the Joint Water Committee’s plan for the Israeli city of Tiberias, on the Sea of Galilee, to sell drinking water to Amman while Aqaba, on the Red Sea coast, sells drinking water to Israel’s Eilat.

Abu Hamour also called for “renewal and adaptation” of the water-related sections of the peace treaty, which govern the committee’s work, “particularly in light of recent innovations in global warming-related solutions and developments in the water field.”

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The World Bank “Feasibility Study on a Red Sea-Dead Sea Water Conveyance” is available at <http://tinyurl.com/co8j69h>.