



CONFERENCE 2006 MEDIA RELEASE
WATER FOR IRRIGATED AGRICULTURE & THE ENVIRONMENT
Finding a Flow for All

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BALANCING WATER FOR FOOD & WATER FOR NATURE
LESSONS FROM KEY RIVER BASINS

An international development conference will today (16 August) hear from water specialists from China, the Indo-Gangetic Basin, the Mekong and our own Murray-Darling about how their countries balance the demands on their rivers for water for food and water for nature. They are speaking at the Crawford Fund's international development conference: "Water for Irrigated Agriculture: Finding a Flow For All" at Canberra's Parliament House.

(The event will be opened by The Hon Alexander Downer, Minister for Foreign Affairs at 9am followed by a keynote address by Dr Frank Rijsberman, Director General of the International Water Management Institute, the world's pre-eminent research institution on management of water for food and agriculture. A press conference will be held at 12pm. The Hon. Malcolm Turnbull will address the future of Australia's water policy at 3.35pm)

"There are lessons to give and to take from other countries who place significant reliance for food production on specific rivers and basin regions," said The Hon Neil Andrew, Chairman of the Crawford Fund.

"Today we will hear whether Australia and our neighbours are carrying-out 'world's best practices or worst disasters' in balancing their demand for water with their need to protect their precious rivers," he said.

"If we thought we were on our own in managing a difficult water resource in our Murray-Darling, then today's speakers will soon dispel that myth," he said.

Dr Philip Hirsch, Director of the Australian Mekong Resource Centre, explained that the Mekong is shared among six countries (China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam), more than 60 million people, a diverse range of ethnic groups, and between those who depend on the river for subsistence together with those who see its potential as a resource for economic growth.

"Only 10% of the Mekong's water is currently appropriated for direct human use. Dams regulate only 5% of the river's water. In a region whose inhabitants include some of the world's poorest people, development pressures are strong. Yet this same development can threaten the livelihoods of those who depend most on the river," said Dr Hirsch.

The ATSE Crawford Fund wishes to thank the sponsors for this event, including:

Alliance of the CGIAR Centers; AusAID - the Australian Agency for International Development; Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research; Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry; Australian Government Department of the Environment and Heritage; CRC for Irrigation Futures; CSIRO Land and Water; CSIRO Livestock Industries; Grains Research and Development Corporation; International Water Management Institute; Land & Water Australia; Murray-Darling Basin Commission; National Water Commission

"Key environmental issues include threats to Cambodia's Tonle Sap (Great Lake), acidity and saltwater intrusion problems in the Delta, flood management, drought, land clearance, ground-water extraction, problems associated with irrigation including salinity, and development that isolates the river from its floodplain."

Dr Hirsch explained that the Mekong River Commission was established to help manage water between its member countries.

"The Mekong River Commission is at an important turning point and faces significant governance challenges. Its leadership and stakeholders need to decide whether it should become more pro-active in support of the river - and those who depend on it - or whether the it is going to put its main energies into promoting infrastructure development."

"The Mekong's advantage is that it's a river whose water is only very partially committed, and in which problems of water quality and quantity remain quite limited and localized. The disadvantage is that this means limited political will and interest, either in establishing enforceable rules to share the river's water resources, or for member countries to place trust in a river commission that governs for the widest public good."

Professor Li Rui, Director, CAS Institute of Soil and Water Conservation, Yangling, Shaanxi, China explained a similarly significant water resource in North China, including the Yellow River, Huaihe River and Haihe River plains.

"North China is highly significant in terms of China's politics, economy, culture and water resources. It supports 35% of the population, produces 32% of China's GDP and provides 42% of China's irrigated area. The region is facing a very severe water shortage which is a big challenge for sustainable social, economic and environmental development," he said.

"Groundwater is over-exploited, with excess usage debts near to 90 billion m³, affecting 70% of the plain area. In recent years scarcity of water resources is becoming increasingly severe due to a drier climate, reduced runoff, increased demand for water for industry and cities, and increasing agricultural irrigation."

Professor Li explained China's answer has been a major engineering effort to carry water from south to north China, as well as efforts at water-saving, water-carrying and water quality protection, wider use of runoff water and groundwater, and better management of all water into and out of the Yellow River Basin.

Dr Tushaar Shah, Principal Scientist at the International Water Management Institute explained that the Indo-Gangetic basin - indeed the whole of South Asia - has experienced a groundwater boom that accounts for over 70% of irrigated areas.

"At some 400 million, the Indo-Gangetic basin is home to more poor people dependent on farming than all of Africa. The region has brought a higher proportion of geographic area under cultivation, a higher proportion of cultivated area under irrigation, and a higher proportion of irrigated area dependent on groundwater than any other place on earth."

"Managing groundwater irrigation in Australia is child's play compared to the Indo-Gangetic basin. Just over 5% of Australia's irrigated areas depend upon groundwater compared to 70% in India and 90% in Bangladesh."

Further information, photos, additional press releases, the program, abstracts and bios are available at www.crawfordfund.org or by contacting Cathy Reade, Public Awareness Coordinator, Crawford Fund on 0413 575 934.