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The Water Crisis and Its Effect on Agriculture

Smriti Hansda[1], Khan Chand[2], Anil Kumar[3]

[1]Assistant Professor (SWCE), College of Agriculture, Bhawanipatna, Odisha University of Agriculture and Technology, Odisha.
[2]Professor & Head Department of Agricultural Engineering, School of Agricultural Sciences, Nagaland University, Medziphema Campus-797106, Distt: Chumukedima, Nagaland, India
[3]Assistant Professor, Department of Agronomy, School of Agriculture, Eklavya University Damoh, Madhya Pradesh-470661

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INTRODUCTION

Water is a vital resource for agriculture, which uses almost 70% of global freshwater withdrawals. Yet, the world is experiencing an increasing water crisis due to population growth, climate change, pollution, over-extraction of groundwater, and inefficient irrigation practices. The implications of this crisis are becoming more evident in the agricultural sector, where water shortage is impacting crop yields, food availability, rural incomes, and environmental stability. This article examines the reasons for and scope of the water crisis, its direct and indirect effects on agriculture, and adaptation and sustainable water management measures in the context of rising challenges.

1. Reasons for the Water Crisis

The world water crisis is fueled by a mix of natural and man-made causes:

Source: iStock

a) Urbanization and Population Growth

Increasing population in the world creates pressure for more water and food. Urbanization also competes with agriculture for limited water resources and tends to drain water from the countryside to urban areas.

b) Climate Change

Climate change impacts the water cycle by changing rainfall patterns, raising evaporation, and strengthening droughts and floods. Areas relying on glacial meltwater or monsoon seasons are particularly exposed.

c) Overexploitation of Groundwater

Over-extraction of groundwater for irrigation, particularly in areas such as North India, Central Asia, and the Middle East, has resulted in a steep drop in water tables, with numerous aquifers reaching critical levels of depletion.

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d) Contamination of Water Bodies

Agricultural runoff, industrial effluent, and untreated sewage have contaminated rivers and lakes, diminishing access to safe freshwater for irrigation.

e) Inefficient Water Use in Agriculture

Flood irrigation methods, canal system leakages, and inefficient water management result in wastage of water at a large scale in agriculture.

2. Impacts on Agriculture

a) Decreased Crop Yields and Productivity

Water scarcity at vital growth phases like flowering and grain filling significantly decreases yields of staple crops like wheat, rice, and maize. Crop failure resulting from extended droughts also has an impact on food availability and farmer revenues.

Source:emLab

b) Cropping Pattern Change

Farmers are increasingly converting to drought-resistant crops like millets, sorghum, or pulses from water-guzzling crops like paddy and sugarcane. This conversion, though indispensable, needs support from policies and market incentives.

c) Decline in Livestock Productivity

Low availability of water impacts livestock both directly by curtailing access to drinking water and indirectly by curbing fodder production, which depends on irrigated pastures and crops.

d) Soil Degradation and Salinity

Over-irrigation in areas with poor drainage and inadequate water management cause waterlogging and salinization of the soil, diminishing the fertility and productivity of the soil in the long run.

e) Increased Farmer Distress and Migration

Water shortage, crop loss, and increasing loans compel most of the farmers to leave agriculture and move to towns in search of new livelihood options, leading to rural distress as well as urban congestion.

3. Regional Case Studies

a) India's Groundwater Crisis

India is the world's largest consumer of groundwater, and many areas are depleting at alarming rates. In Punjab and Haryana, where rice-wheat cropping systems prevail, the declining water table has reached unsustainable heights, endangering future agriculture potential.

b) Sub-Saharan Africa

Rain-fed agriculture prevails across Sub-Saharan Africa, where irregular rainfall and recurring droughts heavily constrain food production. Water harvesting and irrigation facilities remain underdeveloped, further aggravating food insecurity.

c) The Aral Sea Basin

In Central Asia, unsustainable cotton irrigation drained the Aral Sea, resulting in one of the world's most severe ecological catastrophes and long-term agricultural decline.

4. Solutions and Adaptation Strategies

To reduce the impact of the water crisis on agriculture, a mix of technological, institutional, and policy interventions is necessary:

a) Adoption of Efficient Irrigation Technologies

Methods like drip irrigation, sprinkler irrigation, and subsurface irrigation save huge amounts of water and improve yields. Adoption by small farmers can be promoted through government subsidies and extension services.

b) Rainwater Harvesting and Watershed Management

Building farm ponds, check dams, and contour bunds enable rainwater harvesting and storage, recharges groundwater, and enhances water supply during lean times.

c) Crop Diversification and Selection of Drought-Resistant Varieties

Transitioning to climate-resilient and less water-demanding crops can alleviate water stress. Biotechnology and crop improvement also produced drought-resistant cultivars for arid and semi-arid areas.

d) Water Pricing and Policy Reforms

Sensible water pricing can deter wasteful consumption, particularly where electricity is not charged and results in excess groundwater extraction. Institutional reforms within water management and community-led management of resources also enhance accountability and equity.

e) Data and Digital Tools

The use of remote sensing, IoT-based soil moisture sensors, and weather forecasting can help farmers make informed decisions about irrigation timing and quantity, optimizing water use and increasing resilience.

5. The Role of Policy and Institutions

Strenuous government interventions are needed to tackle the water crisis at macro and micro levels. Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM), as advocated by global institutions such as the FAO and UNEP, facilitates planned development and management of water, land, and associated resources. Major policy interventions are:

- Reinforcing irrigation infrastructure.
- Facilitating community water user associations.
- Launching water-saving campaigns.
- Incorporating research and development.

Organizations such as Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs), agricultural universities, and NGOs are also responsible for educating farmers on water conserving methods and capacity building for adaptive farming.

CONCLUSION

The water scarcity poses an enormous threat to the future of agriculture and world food security. With water increasingly in short supply from climate change, population increase, and mismanagement, the imperative for a shift in paradigm in the management of water for agriculture is now. Sustainable water management, technological changes, policy change, and community engagement are essential to make agriculture productive and resilient in the midst of increasing water stresses. The success of such initiatives will decide not just the future of agriculture but also the fate of billions who rely on farming for their livelihood and sustenance.

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