

# Tragic waste of treated water



## The Nutmeg Verses

BY HIMANSHU BHATT

**M**OST of us take the clear water that flows into our homes and commercial premises for granted. In fact, we are dangerously insulated from the reality of how much of this precious natural resource is wasted.

The Association of Water and Energy Research Malaysia (AWER) expressed concern over findings that an estimated RM1.74 billion in treated water was lost in 2010. This is due to the phenomenon of what is known as non-revenue water (NRW) – treated water which cannot be charged for usage as it has been lost, mostly through leakages, theft or inaccurate meters.

To grasp what this loss means, consider this: NRW amounted to 42.7% of the total revenue of Malaysia's water services sector of RM4.06 billion in 2010. That means almost half of the treated water in this country was lost that year.

Commenting on statistics by the Malaysia Water Industry Guide, AWER also noted that while the non-revenue water percentage dropped from 36.63% in 2009 to 36.37% in 2010, the overall volume of treated water loss increased by 3.5% – from 1.8 billion cu m in 2009 to 1.87 billion in 2010.

Interestingly, it also noted that Selangor recorded the highest NRW rate in 2010, followed by Pahang and Sabah. (The lowest wastage, at 18.22%, was recorded by Penang. This was followed by Labuan and Malacca, with 24.91% and 26.02% respectively.)

Seemingly in a response to AWER's concern, the National Water Services Commission (SPAN) attributed such huge wastage to, among other things, the age of pipe networks. It is estimated that about 40% or 50,900km of the pipe networks were laid 40 to 60 years ago or even earlier, SPAN said. There is also the issue of poor maintenance, lack of funding for asset replacements, as well as illegal connections.

"Water operators should have an active leakage control division dedicated to implement NRW programme," a statement by SPAN said. "Going forward, to reduce

commercial losses, all utilities will need to put in place a systematic meter replacement programme to address problems caused by meter under-registration, choked meters, non-functioning meters and stolen meters. Others would include enforcement measures on pilferage and illegal connections, especially by large consumers."

Somewhat controversially, SPAN also said it will set "leakage reduction targets" with water utilities required to set up a priority programme to focus on areas with high NRW levels. Measures to be taken include setting up of District Metering Zones, pressure management and control, active detection and repair of visible leaks, monitoring reservoir overflows, asset management programme and pipe replacement and service connections, it said.

The commission insisted that this approach has been successfully carried out for three states which had migrated to the licensing regime. (Negri Sembilan reduced its NRW from 50.51% in 2008 to 43.41% by end of 2010; Malacca reduced its NRW from 30.09% in 2008 to 26.02% by end 2010, and Johor from 31.30% in 2008 to 29.85% by end of 2010.)

However, AWER reacted indignantly to SPAN's statement that the NRW target levels will be reviewed time to time after the restructuring is completed. "This just proves the ad hoc way of their operations," said AWER president S. Piarapakaran.

And to emphasise its frustration over the matter, he pointed out that the national water services restructuring has been delayed. "It is supposed to be completed during the 9th Malaysia Plan (2006 to 2010). The delay is now 'successfully' entering its second year," he said.

If the controversy over lack of any proper action does not strike the layperson about how serious this issue is, the stark statistics and figures should. So much of our water is being wasted as we speak, even as some areas like Selangor are on the brink of a shortage crisis. Certainly, the authorities and the public need to work concertedly to save our treated water before the situation becomes tragic, and too late.

Himanshu is the Sun's Penang bureau chief.  
Comments: letters@thesundaily.com