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Don't drink the water? State Comptroller wades in

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Local authorities have failed to properly safeguard the quality of the public's drinking water despite having the legal authority to do so, according to a section of the new State Comptroller's Report released on Wednesday.

Inspectors examined water issues in 11 municipalities, three local councils and 13 regional councils, as part of a larger report on local authorities.

In the worst cases, some local authorities had authorized the use of water resources for drinking without first determining Health Ministry drinking water standards had been met. Other municipalities disregarded ministry orders to close down certain wells or springs and continued to use them due to lack of a substitute source.

The report painted a worrying picture of the state of the country's potable water.

In addition to the use of illegal sources of water, there were also a series of maintenance failures. Reservoirs were not cleaned often enough and companies which hooked up to the water mains were not required to install devices which prevented backflow, according to the report.

Unclean water often contains bacteria and other contaminants which reduce tap water's quality.

The comptroller also chastised the Health Ministry and Water Authority for not using their legal powers to force local authorities to safeguard water quality. The comptroller found that many water regulations had not been enforced during its several-month-long investigation.

Not all regional councils were water providers and many of them did not see it as their responsibility to oversee the providers within their municipal boundaries. Smaller municipalities were left to maintain water quality on their own. The comptroller urged that a new attitude of responsibility be implemented and that local and state authorities act together to ensure water quality.

The report also found severe failures in establishing water corporations. The Water Corporation Law was passed in 2001 and mandated that all of the country's residents would be served by a corporation, instead of by the municipality, by 2007. However, only 14, rather than the goal of 30, have been set up so far.

A water corporation manages the water and sewage infrastructure of a city or area instead of the municipality. Each corporation is meant to serve several municipalities in a given area.

In theory, having a separate corporation manage the water issue is meant to ensure that any water financial profits are used for water upgrades rather than other municipal needs such as education or construction.

The report found that the government's approach had not become systematic after the Water Corporation Law was passed.

While a corporation was meant to serve no less than 200,000 residents, some corporations were allowed to serve only 62,500 residents, like the one which serves Modi'in-Maccabim-Reut, which established a corporation in 2006. Their request for a corporation was granted two years before Ramle's was established, which supports 64,200 residents.

The inspectors investigated seven water corporations nationwide.

Ironically, according to an independent study by Dr. Nahum Ben-Aliye and Erez Yemini which was presented on Wednesday at the sixth annual Israeli Water Association Conference, no independent verification has ever been carried out to determine whether 200,000 residents was the optimum number for a corporation to serve.

Both the comptroller's report and the researchers' study blamed the Water Authority for failing to set water prices. Without set prices, the corporation could not raise investment funds and could not conduct business effectively. The Authority is in the process of drafting new water prices. It also failed to publish the corporation service contract, which detailed which services they were providing for citizens.

In general, the water corporations were kept out of sessions at the local planning committees, were not involved in the process of renewing business licenses even though some of the conditions for renewal involved water issues, and the basic standards which they were to adhere to were not drawn up, the comptroller wrote.

The water corporations themselves did show some positive results. Water loss rates dropped in the areas overseen by six of the seven corporations the comptroller's office looked at from 10.4% to 9%.

Infrastructure investment also increased among some of the more established areas.

Ben-Aliye and Yemini found that the smaller water corporations were almost doomed to bankruptcy from the start because there was not enough revenue from water prices to sustain them.

The two researchers also found that no regulations protecting the rights of minorities to receive water from water corporations had been included.

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