



Israel's Mediterranean a "septic tank?"

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By Tova Cohen

TEL AVIV (Reuters) - The Mediterranean is often called the world's most polluted sea and the waters around Tel Aviv offer a reason why.

Heavy metals and pesticides are discharged into the sea under government licenses, environmentalists say, and the company responsible for the sewage of the area's 2.5 million people is the biggest polluter in the eastern Mediterranean.

"The state of Israel's coastal waters is appalling," the environmental group Zalul said in its State of the Sea Report for 2007.

The 21 countries ringing the Mediterranean share problems like coastal overdevelopment, overfishing and pollution but in Israel, long preoccupied with security issues, environmental awareness has been slow to take hold.

"The perception of the sea as a great outdoor septic tank for unforeseen circumstances is at fault in Israel in general," the Jerusalem Post newspaper said in a recent editorial.

Claude Levi, a 36-year-old mother of two and former nurse, says she hasn't bathed in the sea in several years, even though she lives only a 10-minute drive from the beach.

"The water isn't clean and I don't like the jellyfish," she said. "I have a baby and I take her to the pool. I've never taken her to the beach."

After a successful battle against fish cages destroying the coral reefs of the Red Sea, Zalul is focusing its clean-up fight on wastewater permits issued by a government committee.

More than 100 permits for discharging wastewater into the sea are granted by the committee every year -- sometimes very close to bathing beaches, Zalul says.

"There is a big problem in Israel confronting industries and municipalities and the government doesn't want to invest money," Yariv Abramovich, Zalul's managing director, told Reuters.

Discharged into the sea every year with the committee's authorization are 140 tons of heavy metals, 130 tons of pesticides, 5 tons of arsenic, 1,300 tons of ammonia and a ton of cyanide, the Zalul report said.

"There are concerns that industries important to the Israeli economy are treated leniently when the conditions of the permits are drawn up," the report said.

The Environmental Protection Ministry said Zalul's report was not accurate and beaches were much cleaner than they used to be. "Israel is in one of the better positions in this area," a ministry spokesman said.

TEL AVIV A LEADING POLLUTER

The most recent United Nations report on the Mediterranean ranked the greater Tel Aviv area as one of the 10 most polluting urban centers in the Mediterranean.

Minister Gideon Ezra recently told the Jerusalem Post his ministry lacked the manpower to enforce environmental regulations properly. "To make a real change I need a strong legal department in my office that can investigate and press charges against criminals who pollute," he was quoted as saying.

Israel's largest polluter is the Shafdan, or the Dan Region Association of

Towns for Sewage and Environmental Issues. It is responsible for the sewage of the greater Tel Aviv area, consisting of 26 municipalities.

Shafdan spokesman Amnon Liebermann said 96 percent of the area's waste was recycled as water. However, the remaining 4 percent is discharged as sludge into the sea.

Following a government decision, the Shafdan began preparations to burn the sludge. But the Environmental Protection Ministry now says it wants to look at agricultural solutions, such as turning the sludge into fertilizer.

Sagit Rogenstein, Zalul's national projects director, said burning the sludge would release harmful chemicals. "So you would be breathing it instead of swimming in it," she said.

Liebermann said the Shafdan was open to other options. It invested 50 million shekels (\$12.5 million) to experiment with a solution called enviro, which mixes the sludge with calcium. The end product can be used for agriculture or building material.

"We believe that in six months we will use enviro on 15 percent of the sludge," Liebermann said.

Ironically, a government proposal to help clean up the polluted Kishon River in northern Israel could increase the problems in the Mediterranean.

The plan calls for a pipeline to take waste from the factories along the river, including Israel's biggest oil refinery, and spill it directly into the sea.

"We've been working with the ministry and bringing experts from abroad to prove there are ways of further reducing pollution from factories and the worst idea is to divert it to the sea," Rogenstein said.

Environmental consultant Daniel Levy said some progress has been made in recent years in reducing pollution.

"I would give the government credit...But we have reached a plateau," he said.

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