

22% of India's groundwater dried up or in critical state

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Almost 22% of groundwater (assessed units) in the country has either dried up or is in the 'critical' and 'over-exploited' categories, Jal Shakti (water resources) minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat said as he emphasised the need to focus on efficient use of water resources and noted that 10% of water saving in the agriculture sector now would make it available for all users for the next 50 years.

The 'Dynamic Ground Water Resources of India' report of the Central Ground Water Board (CGWB) showed that 1,499 out of 6,881 assessed units (blocks/mandals/taluks) in 2017 came under 'over-exploited' (1,186 units) and 'critical' (313 units) categories. The report sought immediate change in extraction pattern of groundwater and surface water interventions.

With annual extraction of groundwater in these units exceeding annual replenishment, Shekhawat told TOI on Friday that it was time to improve 'demand side' management by taking multiple measures instead of only managing 'supply side' of water resources.

"Agriculture sector consumes nearly 89% of available water resources in India. We really need to help farmers and create awareness among them so that they can move towards water use efficiency measures such as drip and sprinkler irrigation," he said.

The minister, who visited Israel last week to take part in the WATEC conference, said there were many things which India could learn from Israel's experience and replicate. He said works on aquifer (underground layer of water-bearing rock) mapping was going on at full pace to delineate and characterise groundwater aquifers and develop suitable management plans. "Aquifer mapping of all 256 water stressed districts (covering nearly 5,500 blocks) will be completed by March. It will help us make farmers and other users aware of water availability and tell them how they should use it," Shekhawat said.

The highest number of water stressed blocks were in Tamil Nadu (541) followed by Rajasthan (218), Uttar Pradesh (139), Telangana (137), Punjab (111) and Haryana (81).

The CGWB report showed that 'over-exploited' areas were mostly concentrated in parts of Punjab, Haryana, Delhi and western Uttar Pradesh (where even though replenishable resources are abundant, there has been indiscriminate withdrawal of groundwater leading to over-exploitation); parts of Rajasthan and Gujarat (where due to arid climate, groundwater recharge is limited); and parts of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Tamil Nadu where due to inherent properties of crystalline aquifers, the groundwater availability is low.
