

Seminar to discuss the Project Document for the proposed Arsenic Mitigation Centre

Address by
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to the Government of India
Ministry of Rural Development
Department of Drinking Water Supply

I am happy to be present in today's Seminar, organised by Water and Power Consultancy Service, for the specific purpose of discussing and finalising the Project Implementation Document for establishing the proposed Arsenic Mitigation Centre at Kolkata.

2. As you all are very well aware, more than 85% of Rural Water Supply is sustained by ground water source. In recent years, water quality has emerged as a major issue in the rural water supply sector. Among the host of water quality problems due to chemical contamination, fluoride and arsenic contamination have come to stay as the most challenging ones, posing a serious health hazard to a very large segment of the rural population in the country. The problem of arsenic is, by and large, limited to the State of West Bengal, though recently it has also been reported from one or two other States as well.

3. Government of India is very much concerned about the serious impact of arsenic contamination and has initiated a three-pronged mitigation strategy incorporating:

(a) Short-term measures, aimed at providing immediate relief to the affected rural population, comprising replacement of contaminated tube wells by new ones, tapping deeper third layer and installation of shallow sanitary dugwells, both being contamination free options.

(b) Long-term measures in the form of alternate strategy, tapping problem free surface water through piped water supply schemes, catering to a cluster of habitations.

(c) Use of appropriate available technology for the removal of contaminant and its safe disposal.

4. In spite of initiating timely mitigation measures, the ever-increasing severity and enormity of the problem continues to pose a great challenge. Another grey area that continues to cause a lot of concern is the actual number of contaminated sources in the affected districts. Though testing of sources has been going on by different agencies, the sheer plurality of the problem, coupled with inadequate infrastructure for testing, has added another dimension to the problem.

5. Keeping this in view, Government of India accorded sanction for establishing a well equipped Central Chemical Laboratory in Kolkata, besides sanctioning eight District level Water testing laboratory in the affected districts, during 1998. Subsequently it was

decided, in consultation with Government of West Bengal, various Central Government Organisations and external support agencies engaged in Arsenic mitigation, to upgrade the Central Laboratory into an autonomous, multi-disciplinary Arsenic Mitigation Centre for formulating and implementing a time bound Action Plan for tackling the problem in its totality. In this regard, I would like to thank the Government of West Bengal for making available one acre of land in Kolkata for housing the proposed Centre.

6. The proposed Centre would function both as a referral and documentation Centre for all problems relating to arsenic contamination; besides, this Centre would also provide scientific guidance and coordinate as well as monitor various mitigation activities. The “Project Implementation Document” is the first step towards the establishment of the Centre and as such, spells out the road map, not only for establishing the Centre, but also for implementation of the future mitigation strategy. The document will also spell out an appropriate institutional mechanism and related administrative, technical and financial arrangement. A tentative financial outlay for functioning of the Centre for the initial five years has also been incorporated in the document.

7. In this context I would appeal to all external support agencies to consider extending appropriate financial and technical support to the proposed Centre to ensure its smooth functioning for achieving the objectives within a stipulated time frame. Incidentally, it may be relevant to mention that in Bangladesh with a similar water quality problem, a National Arsenic Mitigation Information Centre has been established recently.

8. The proposed Centre, among other things, would have networking facilities with other reputed National and International Agencies engaged in Arsenic problem, including National Arsenic Mitigation Information Centre. In view of the prevailing common features of the Arsenic problem both in West Bengal and Bangladesh, the proposed Centre would network with National Arsenic Mitigation Information Centre for the purpose of a joint mitigation approach and for collaborative programmes in respect of common problems viz. safe disposal of sludge, evolving a cost effective and user friendly removal technology, delineating the actual extent and magnitude of the problem based on a dependable sampling technique. I would urge upon the participants to have a close look at the various aspects and come out with appropriate strategy to ensure that the proposed Centre is sustainable and is able to achieve the set goals.

9. I am confident that the participants assembled here, with their vast experience and expertise in this field, would ensure lively discussion and provide valuable inputs, which will be of immense help in the finalisation of the Project Document, paving the way for the establishment of the Centre.

With these words, I wish the Seminar all success.
Thank You.