

As part of World Water Day on March 22, Latin America played host to a water week of its own, gathering speakers to elaborate on climate change, irrigation, food security and new water sources, among other topics. 

The week kicked off in Chile's Region V (Valparaiso) on March 17 with a walk to promote water and sanitation. Once the main part of the week got rolling, a major topic was irrigation and food security, emphasizing the importance of sustainable water management in agriculture and expected demand for this vital food resource.

Pasquale Stedute, deputy director of land and water in the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), spoke on the figures that could heavily impact agriculture development if appropriate measures are not taken on time.

For example, food demand is expected to increase 60% by 2050, the populations of developing countries will skyrocket and food prices will continue to rise over the next 40 years.

Faced with such a reality, the FAO representative emphasized that the only way to make agriculture sustainable and efficient will be to learn to better utilize our resources. Precautionary measures are not only the task of producers but also of nations which must help support infrastructure, training and irrigation project development. Governments should also work to support the development of plant varieties better suited to producing countries and climate change.

Stedute said food output must increase over the coming years due to population growth. The major question, however, is how to properly improve production. He supported the development of more productive varieties and the expansion of farmland. He said that producers must also work to decrease food waste during harvest, storage, transport and on the market.

The deputy director also explained the importance of educating populations on how to nourish themselves in a healthy way, thus promoting the consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables. Beyond sustainability, a major motive for healthy eating is to reduce obesity levels, especially in more developed countries where consumers have more power to buy food that is not necessarily fresh or healthy.

Stedute also spoke on the importance of tackling water scarcity on a global level. He encouraged more developed countries with more experience, technology and efficiency to lend a hand to those countries that lag behind.

Felipe Martin of the National Irrigation Commission spoke on the strategy being implemented by Chile. The construction of 14 dams, a filtration project and a telemetry system are among the tasks being tackled by private actors and the government to improve the water infrastructure.

Martin noted that Chile is an asymmetric country. From the central valley to the south, there is a surplus that has helped agricultural development. In the north, however, the deficit of water has impeded growth, especially given competition with the mining industry.

Alicia Fernández of the Universidad de Buenos Aires department for water studies, presented on the importance of maintaining water quality. According to the specialist, since agriculture consumes around 70% of the resource, it is importance to ensure quality and safe water for food production.

Fernández said water can transport contaminants and that this is directly related to food safety.

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