



Lake restoration project yet to take off

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By Mukhtar Alam

KARACHI, Nov 14: Thanks to the official apathy, a significant project for restoration of Haleji Lake and other surface water bodies across the province has not been launched despite the lapse of a considerable time.

Keeping in view the rapidly increasing level of pollution in major freshwater bodies of Sindh, including the Haleji and Keenjhar lakes, the Sindh government had included a project titled 'Feasibility study and remedial measures for restoration of lakes and other water bodies in Sindh' in its annual development programme (2009-10) and set June 30, 2011 as its target date of completion.

However, according to sources in the government, despite a good advocacy of the project, no progress on the ground can be seen yet.

An amount of Rs70 million was allocated for the first year of the project, but the administrative department concerned — the environment and alternative energy department of the Sindh government — failed to utilise it and ensure the launch of the project during 2009-10.

The environment department — which was asked to furnish some more information and modify the project paper in line with the concerns raised in the working paper pertaining to the project and the minutes of a technical committee of the planning and development department — is yet to submit a modified PC-1, said a source in the planning department.

When contacted, the secretary of the environment and alternative energy department told Dawn that the modified PC-1 had been sent to the authorities concerned. And an advertisement for hiring a consultancy firm would be given in the newspapers as soon as an administrative approval of the project was given and funds were released by the Sindh finance department.

Situated 88 kilometres from Karachi in the Thatta district of Sindh is the wonderful Haleji Lake, which is not only a large bird sanctuary, but also has been a source of water supply to Karachi.

However it is now threatened by an increased level of pollution and deterioration in its water quality.

There were reports about the Keenjhar Lake that this important wetland was also receiving highly polluted water from the Kalri Baghar Feeder (KB Feeder) and being turned into another Manchhar Lake — which is now considered a dead lake.

The director (technical) at the Sindh Environment Protection Agency (Sepa), Viqar H. Phulpoto, said that the non-availability of freshwater downstream Kotri for the past many years had contributed a lot to the degradation of the water bodies environmentally and hygienically.

He held that unsafe water was not only affecting the public health, but also adding to the numerous other problems.

A former director-general of Sepa, Dr Iqbal Saeed Khan, some years back in a report submitted to the Sindh government had observed that the Manchhar Lake had been destroyed because of more or less the same reasons that Keenjhar Lake was now facing.

Expert said the Kotri barrage was the source of domestic, industrial and irrigation water supply for an area of about 278 million acres.

The four canals that flow out of the barrage are the KB Feeder from the right bank and Pinhyari, Phuleli and Akram Wah from the left bank.

The KB Feeder, whose designed discharge is 9,100 cusecs and has a compound area of 0.656 million acres, feeds water to the wetlands, namely Keenjhar and Haleji.

The untreated wastewater flowing into the canals and its surrounding areas contains dissolved solids, suspended solids, inorganic and organic compounds, oils, solvents, greases, thermal discharge, etc, and can cause `corcinogens` or `teratogens` (products of birth defects) and mutations developing `mutagens`, it was learnt.

According to a source, realising the necessity of protecting the freshwater bodies of Sindh, especially against the backdrop of the little available sweet groundwater, the authorities opted for undertaking a massive remedial measures plan.

Since the revival and restoration works need a huge amount of money, the planners and executers in the government decided to start with a phased initiative and the Haleji Lake was to be a pilot project.

The works needed to be done in the case of the Haleji Lake included monitoring, acquisition of relevant data and management plan, water testing facilities, creation of awareness in the communities concerned, lake cleaning, de-silting, revamping and rehabilitation of embankments, reclaiming of the biological environment and eco-tourism. Although, an ADP approval of the Haleji Lake project was given by the Provincial Development Working Party (PDWP) in January, Rs70 million was allocated on the insistence of the then minister of the environment in the budget of 2009-10.

However, no implementation could be seen and the environment department kept sitting idle without spending even a rupee on the project, said a source privy to the preparatory works on the project.

It was said that the technical committee of the planning and development department cleared the project for a final approval of the competent forum of the PDWP on January 26.

When the PDWP met on January 28, the environment department did not submit a modified PC-1 as was required earlier.

The secretary of the environment and alternative energy department gave the background of the scheme and assured that the PC-1 would be modified accordingly as per decisions of the technical committee meeting and would be based on rationalisation of the components, including activities like hiring of consultancy services, durable equipment and staff.

The chairman of the PDWP said that since the Karachi Water and Sewerage Board was the custodian of the Haleji Lake in terms of operation and maintenance (O&M), therefore their presence was essential and it had to commit to bear O&M expenses after investing funds through development.

On the request of the environment department secretary, the PDWP, however, approved the scheme.

The environment department being the administrative department of the project was also asked to modify the PC-1 in the light of discussions at the meeting and points raised in the working paper.

The environment department was also asked to consult or engage all relevant departments/agencies such as the KWSB, the Forest and Wild Life Department, the Works and Services Department, the Irrigation and Power Department, the Culture and Tourism Department, the Livestock and Fisheries Department, before initiating work and get their input.

It was also bounded to provide commitment of the KWSB for O&M of the scheme and observe all the government/PPRA Rules/Regulations, procedures and formalities in the implementation of the scheme.

Officials related to the modification of the PC-1 said that works were yet to get the due pace. It may be said that the draft of the modified P-C 1 had been prepared after efforts of 10 months, but it still needed a final approval before its submission to the planning and development department.

A source in the planning department also maintained that the awaited documents were still to be received at the planning department.

On the contrary, the secretary of the environment and alternative energy department, Mir Hussain Ali, said that after holding a series of meeting with other departments and agencies,

including the KWSB, the PC-1 of the remedial measures and restoration of lakes and water bodies had been modified and recently sent to the planning department.

He said that though there was a financial crunch and slashing of various development projects in the wake of floods in the country and province, he was hopeful that the government would extend its support and financial resources for the implementation of the Haleji Lake project.

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