Government rolls out plan to save water, says it will be a mass movement

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Rolling out its water conservation plan under the Jal Shakti Abhiyan on Monday, the Centre said it would focus its time-bound, mission-mode campaign on 1,592 “water-stressed” blocks in 257 districts.

Launching the “Sanchay Jal, Behtar Kal” campaign for rainwater harvesting and water conservation, Jal Shakti Minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat said the plan would rely largely on mass awareness programmes.

Jal Shakti Ministry officials said it will also involve focused implementation and convergence of existing water conservation schemes under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, Integrated Watershed Management Programme, and Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana’s per-drop-more-crop (micro-irrigation) programme.

Pointing out that at the existing pace, India’s water availability is estimated to decline to 1,341 cubic meter per capita per year by 2025 (from 5,177 cubic meter per capita per year in 1951), Shekhawat said: “We are staring at a water crisis. But there are also examples of states such as Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Gujarat and others that have undertaken efforts to resolve it. Like the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan where the success had much to do with how it became a jan andolan, this too will be implemented through community-based programmes.”

Speaking of how the United Nations, under its sustainable development goals, expects all countries to provide clean drinking water to every household by 2030, Shekhawat said that at present, only 8% of the total rainwater in the country is harvested — one of the many reasons why it needs to become a people’s movement.

The ministry is yet to give details of its plan to provide piped water to every household by 2024, as mentioned in the BJP’s poll manifesto promise of “Nal Se Jal”.

The 1,592 blocks, identified as “water-stressed” as per the Central Ground Water Board’s 2017 data, include 313 critical blocks, 1,000-odd over-exploited blocks and 94 blocks with least water availability (for states without water-stressed blocks).

“Over exploited blocks are those that have used up over 100% of their groundwater availability, which is the case in states like Punjab and Haryana, whereas critical blocks are those where the extraction levels have reached 90-100%,” said a ministry official.
Central government officials — of the rank of joint secretaries to additional secretaries across ministries — have been designated as Central Prabhari officers for each of the 257 districts to monitor implementation of the plan.

Secretary (Drinking Water and Sanitation) Parameswaran Iyer said the five targeted interventions would include water conservation and rainwater harvesting, renovation of traditional and other water bodies/tanks, re-use and borewell recharge structures, watershed development, and intensive afforestation.

Speaking on urban waste water re-use, he said there will be bye-laws for separation of grey water (sullage) and black water (sewage). “In each urban area, one urban water body will be repaired and developed,” he said.

Officials said the ministry has commissioned a study through The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI) to look at the massive water consuming industries such as steel, cement, power, and prescribe benchmarks for each.