



Ambassador Jeffrey L. Bleich – WateReuse Association

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**Remarks at the Water Reuse and Desalination:  
Water Scarcity Solutions for the 21st Century Conference  
Sydney**

*(As prepared for delivery – November 15, 2010)*

Thank you very much for that kind introduction.

[John Adams line]

I'd like to thank the WateReuse Association, its Australian affiliate, WateReuse Australia, and the Water Services Association of Australia for hosting this event.

Recently I told my children that as a human being I'm composed of about 60 percent water. And they didn't believe it. In particular, they didn't believe the part about my being a human being.

But in addition to just being human, I have a special interest in water management. As a Californian, I'm from a land where water consumption and conservation is a constant issue. As an Ambassador, I now live in a sunburned country, where water scarcity is one of the main limits on growth. So, I get how important the work you all do is for our world. That is why it is a special pleasure to be here to help open this conference. While I hope you get to enjoy the beauty of Sydney, today and during the sessions ahead, you all have some big work to do grappling with one of the great challenges of our time.

I won't go through all of the statistics about water, since many of you probably were the ones who discovered them. But we know this: many parts of this world already suffer from serious water insecurity. As populations grow and water demand increases that will only get worse. We also know that as a species we waste far too much water. And finally we know that in addition to our own wasteful habits and increased consumption, we face a real prospect of diminished supply because of climate changes. If we don't address this, we risk our health, our prosperity, our security, and the very foundations of our society.

So, you know, no pressure. Just think about that if you feel tempted to sneak out of a session to walk around the beautiful Opera House . . . . Just saying.

Now as America Ambassador, let me begin with America's experience. In the United States, much of the nation is blessed with snowcapped mountains or extensive rivers and



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lakes. But we have also been aware of limits on our water resources since at least the 1800s.

Back then, an eminent geologist and famous explorer of the American West by the name of John Wesley Powell warned Congress that the lack of water was a serious obstacle to settling large portions of the West. While human ingenuity ultimately allowed us to find and deliver water to build communities even in dry areas Las Vegas, Powell's warnings resonate today among those who study water use. But for people in the United States who are not in the water industry, they too often take for granted that their water is cheap, clean, safe and seemingly unlimited. None of us can even imagine anything more than a temporary drought.

It's only when you step outside of the country that you appreciate that this is a delusion. About 880 million people in this world lack access to an improved water source. More than two and a half billion people do not have access to basic sanitation; and THAT number is growing. The combination of inadequate access to water, sanitation, and hygiene is responsible for the deaths of more than 1.5 million children each year. These statistics help us appreciate what a luxury it is to have clean, cheap, safe, unrestricted water.

But water challenges aren't confined just to the developing world. They affect every country on earth. Even in prosperous developed countries like the United States and Australia, we know there are fierce disagreements over shared water resources. Just north of us one of the great water challenges in the world is the sharing of the Mekong River, and the impact of dams in the upper Mekong upon Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam.

In fact, when I look at the great challenges of our time – desperate people turning to extremism and violence, nations crippled by disease, massive dislocations of people, mothers and children starving – water is often both the critical problem and a critical solution.

As water becomes even more scarce, these problems only intensify. Absent major changes in how we act, and new solutions by people like you, the prediction is that water will become even more scarce. Experts predict – that is, you predict – that by 2025, just 15 years from now, nearly two-thirds of the world's countries will be water-stressed. Many sources of freshwater will be under additional strain from climate change and population growth. And 2.4 billion people will face absolute water scarcity – the point at which a lack of water threatens social and economic development.

So we need solutions, but we also need time to put those solutions into effect. It is not just the time it takes to roll out new efforts; it is the time it takes to convince people to



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adopt them. Change is hard; people resist it. My kids use one device for virtually all of their needs: to make phone calls, to tell the time, to wake them up. I have the same device, but I also still have a landline at home, a watch, and an alarm clock. It is hard to change. In all the time I've been in the United States, I've never seen a two-speed toilet, even though that's all you have here in Australia. So we need to get started early, because we not only need the solutions, we need to get humankind to change and accept those solutions. If not, we're all going to face a dangerous and degraded future.

For all of these reasons, the United States has made water and sanitation a high priority on our overall international agenda. In fact, when I met recently with a group of the Ambassadors for the Asia-Pacific, we all discussed water as one of the great diplomatic and development challenges of our time.

The United States is already doing a great deal to help governments develop and implement solutions to their water challenges.

In FY 2009, the United States invested about \$774 million in water sector and sanitation-related activities in developing countries. Some 5.7 million people received improved access to safe drinking water and 1.3 million received improved access to sanitation as a result of our efforts.

We know, though, that this challenge is much too large for the United States – or any one nation – to address alone. So we need to work together with other nations, the international research community, and partners in the nonprofit and private sectors to find solutions.

In our mission here, the United States and Australia have been working together on every dimension of the water spectrum from research to formulating policy to rolling out actual market solutions. Our Embassy has brought together experts on water policy from both nations to help find the new and better ways of protecting the earth's most precious resource, and meeting all of our water needs. We are working together on everything from water restrictions, to smart grids, to water-saving devices, to water reclamation projects, to desalination. In fact, last week I was with the Prime Minister and Secretary Clinton at a building in Melbourne that draws all of its water from catchments on the roof, for irrigation, building use, and reed bed irrigation, and draws nothing from City supplies.

We are also working with international organizations – particularly the World Bank and UN Agencies – which have extensive experience on these issues. This work makes me confident we can meet the challenges facing the world in the 21st century. But that will not happen without the hard work of people like you.



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So on behalf of the President of the United States, and the people of the United States, thank you for what you are about to do. We're all depending upon you.