

## **(Conference Call)**

### **CATCHING ON IN BRAZIL**

In July, over 250 participants gathered in the Brazilian city of Petrolina for the 9th International Rainwater Catchment Systems Conference. The meeting - the first international conference on this topic in Latin America - coincided with a severe drought and water shortages, so both public and policymakers were sharply focused on the issue of water. Presentations touched on coping with droughts, design issues, political and socio-economic aspects, gender and community issues, water quality, runoff management, and the use of the technology in both agricultural and urban contexts.

Despite Brazil's enormous freshwater resources, the Amazon river system alone carrying about 40 per cent of the world's freshwater runoff, many parts of the country suffer from chronic water shortages. Petrolina lies in the heart of Brazil's semi-arid north-east region which supports 15 million people who constantly struggle against the affects of water scarcity. Although rainfall averages about 500mm/a in the region, it ranges from less than 200mm in dry years to over 1000mm in the wettest, leading to flood and drought cycles that make agriculture

precarious. In times of drought, water is commonly trucked in at considerable expense. Many towns and cities in the north-east also suffer from periodic water crises. This year Recife, a city of 3 million people on the coast and in a relatively humid zone, suffered from an acute water shortage. In many parts of the city taps were only working for a few days each month as part of a compulsory rationing strategy, with residents being forced to store water.

In the rural areas the possibilities for rainwater catchment are starting to be realized. A number of different projects - each accounting for the implementation of hundreds of cisterns - have recently been implemented; conference participants were able to see some of these projects themselves. In the county of Campo Alegre de Lourdes, the local rural workers' union initiated a household rainwater cistern. The inspiration for using the 15m<sup>3</sup> roof tanks to give individual farming families independent water supplies resulted from a course in rural development conducted by IRPAA (Regional Institute for Appropriate Smallholder Farming and Animal Husbandry) a local NGO key in bringing the 9th IRWCS conference to Brazil. In 1995, after failing to interest the local district

council, a syndicate led by the union approached Oxfam who agreed to fund 100 cisterns. Members drew lots for the cisterns and agreed to pay for these in two instalments, thus creating a fund through which other cisterns could be built. Now, over 1600 cisterns have been built and the project aims to provide one for every family in the community. In rural Brazil, the provision of water supplies has often been used as a tool to encourage support for the ruling political élite, a situation summed up well by a poster stating simply, 'one rainwater cistern is worth 100 water trucks at election time!'

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The 10th International Rainwater Catchment Systems Conference will be held in Darmstadt, Germany in September 2001. Further details will be given in forthcoming issues of *Waterlines*, or contact: HansHartung@compuserve.com.

## ***Bulletin of the World Meteorological Organization***



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