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FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

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**Web Annex 1: Setting regional priorities to manage water for agriculture
under conditions of water scarcity -
Note on COVID-19**

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COVID-19, Water and Human Health

Impact

1. The COVID-19 pandemic underscores the vital importance of achieving Sustainable Development Goal 6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all. The pandemic is closely related to water and sanitation. Most obviously, one of the simple precautionary measures – frequent hand washing – helps prevent the transmission. Water is also essential for agricultural production and food security. Agriculture accounts for 70 percent of freshwater withdrawals worldwide and is also widely recognized as a significant source of water contamination, including microorganism contamination (FAO, 2020). Water insecurity – whether for human health or food production – exacerbates the impacts of COVID-19 on economies and human health.

Response

2. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) promotes a multi-sectoral approach to integrated water resources management under the One Water One Health concept. This initiative recognizes that decisions regarding land and water use have real health implications. The integrated water resources management approach championed by FAO embraces the value of water in all its forms and recognizes the intrinsic role of water in protecting human, animal and ecosystem health. Key actions include improving water quality and access through multiple-use systems and strengthening national policies and action plans on health, water, and food security.

COVID-19 and Water Resource Use

Impact

3. The COVID-19 pandemic required many countries across Asia and the Pacific region to enact drastic measures, including mandatory self-isolation, food market closures and the closure of small businesses. As a direct consequence, many people who were earning their living in urban centres had little choice but to return to their rural villages and take action to diversify their food supply. This migration has led to a rapid diversification in land use. Recent observations in Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Thailand have found that many households that previously specialized in cultivating rice started planting vegetables and fruit trees instead. While helping community food security and nutrition in the short to medium term, these land-use changes have triggered a sudden increase in groundwater extraction and consumption, even in areas where groundwater levels were already unsustainable. Consequently, local water security is declining in many areas, which will adversely affect long-term food security.

Response

4. FAO is working to create healthier ecosystems by ensuring the effective use of available resources and expertise to address resource scarcity in the agricultural sector. This work includes regular monitoring and assessment of water resources, including support for identifying hotspots from where zoonotic diseases spread (for example, by using FAO AQUASTAT – the global information system on water resources). FAO also identifies technical innovations that address wastewater management in agriculture, including reuse, increasing water productivity and the protection of essential ecosystem services. In Asia and the Pacific region, FAO will be developing policy recommendations and strategies to improve water storage capacity and facilitate more sustainable use of groundwater aquifers, targeting areas where COVID-19 restrictions have led to the most drastic changes in water use.