

Saudi Arabia approves plan to privatise SWCC

JEDDAH — The executive plan for the privatisation of the Saline Water Conversion Corporation (SWCC) that runs more than 30 desalination plants in the Kingdom, has been approved by Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, according to Water and Electricity Minister Abdullah Al Hussayen.

Fehaid Al Sharief, governor of the SWCC, said the Corporation is considering three options, including the formation of five companies to privatise the organisation.

Al Sharief said the corporation's board would select the best option from the three and make its proposals to the Supreme Economic Council (SEC).

The first option calls for converting the corporation into a joint stock company and offering part of its shares for public subscription. Participation of the private sector in SWCC assets is the second option. Under the third option five independent companies would be formed to operate the main desalination plants.

Al Hussayen said the king had also endorsed the executive programme for the privatisation of sewage water treatment plants across the country, and will boost investment in water and electricity projects," he explained.

He said the measure was also aimed at meeting the growing demand for water in the Kingdom as a result of increasing population and growing industrial and business activities all over the country.

He said the sewage water treatment plants would be gradually brought under the National Water Company in order to improve their facilities and management.

Water consumption in the Kingdom continues to increase, and to maintain the efficiency and continuity of water production, Saudi Arabia has to invest in projects valued over \$60 billion for water technologies during the next two decades.

Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) has projected that water demand in Saudi Arabia will rise to 24,200 million cubic metres (MCM) by the year 2025, broken down as follows: 6,450 MCM for domestic use, 16,300 MCM for agriculture, and 1,450 for industrial consumption.

ESCWA said the Kingdom leads other Gulf countries in water consumption due to increasing requirements of its agricultural and industrial sectors, particularly, petrochemicals, cement, foods and beverage production.

According to ESCWA, "most industrial activities (in the Gulf region) are confined close to major urban centres, requiring competition with the domestic sector to satisfy water requirements. In urban areas with concentrated industrial activities, industrial water requirements represent the major aspect of water consumption in relation to domestic requirements."

"In most of the GCC countries, field development and petrochemical industries are considered to be water-use intensive, and rely on groundwater supplemented with surface water, desalination, and a limited amount of recycled water," explained ESCWA.

Saudi Arabia is the world's largest producer of desalinated water. It may be recalled that a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to conduct joint research in the desalinisation technology exists between the SWCC and Saudi Aramco.

According to Saleh Al Jarrah, director of research and technology at SWCC the MoU is aimed at developing new technologically and economically viable methods of water desalination. The agreement would also endeavour to guarantee the sustained supply of potable water in the country.

Al Jarrah said the SWCC has concluded several cooperation agreements with various international research agencies mainly from Japan and Singapore in the past. The agreements also include efforts for profitable application of the membrane technology for water treatment.

Several experimental projects are progressing at the institute's laboratories in Jubail. Various Saudi universities and King Abdul Aziz City of Science and Technology are also cooperating in the researches.

According to an official of the water department of the ministry of water and electricity, cities and villages in the Kingdom are now 80 to 90 percent covered by network of potable water connection.

Sulaiman Abdulrahman Al Shalah, assistant director for project at the ministry said in major cities like Riyadh the network connection is over 90 percent.

"Though the Kingdom has achieved water interconnection in cities and villages, much more is required to efficiently manage these networks," he said.