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MEDIA RELEASE

Riversymposium opening sessions: Environment and economy inextricably linked

Global business is waking up to green issues, as continuing on our present course will have economic not just ecological repercussions, according to world experts speaking at the 10th International Riversymposium & Environmental Flows Conference, which started in Brisbane today.

Rafik Hirji, Senior Water Resources Management Specialist from the World Bank, USA said the global financial institution had completely changed its thinking in the past year because it can see a clear link between high climate variability and economic vulnerability.

"The world's economies are hostage to hydrology," Mr Hirji said. "Never before has the World Bank been so committed to sustainability."

Both Hirji and other speakers at the symposium pointed to 10 mega cities emerging in Asia as a major concern – with the majority of the world's urban centres based around rivers the huge population growth forecast for the next 20 years will have a massive effect on water supply.

During the Urban Rivers session Karin Krchnak of The Nature Conservancy said by 2030 more than 60 percent of the population will be living in urban communities with 35 percent of these in coastal environmental systems.

"By 2025 more than 56 countries will be affected by water stress or scarcity," Ms Krchnak said.

Nick Davidson, Deputy Secretary General of the Ramsar Convention Secretariat (the oldest of the global intergovernmental environmental agreements with 155 member states), said the world's wetlands, which supply the global community with the majority of its freshwater, were worth \$US14 trillion per annum.

"However they are still viewed more as wastelands than wetlands, and they are deteriorating and disappearing at a rate of 2.5% every year," Mr Davidson said.

"This decline hurts the world's poorest people the most and climate change is making it worse."

Lucy Emerton, Regional Group Head, Ecosystems and Livelihoods Group Asia, IUCN — The World Conservation Union, presented several global case studies demonstrating the economic need to reinstate the world's natural water systems using funds for poverty relief.

"From an economic perspective, natural ecosystems should be treated, counted and invested in as elements of water development infrastructure — as a stock of facilities, services and equipment which are needed for the economy and society to function properly," Ms Emerton said.

"Ignoring the economic benefits of floodplains, for example, is ignoring the hundreds of thousands of people who are already marginalised.

Emerton pointed to the case of Nakivubo in Uganda as an example of misdirected economic



Dedicated to a better Brisbane



International Riversymposium is part of Riverfestival, an initiative of Brisbane City Council and the Queensland Government.

priorities.

The local council decided to rezone the area for industrial and residential use and included wetlands in the new zoning despite major concerns.

They did not realise the wetlands were playing a major role in filtering waste from water before it entered Lake Victoria and was re-drawn for drinking supplies.

“They were destroying natural and necessary infrastructure,” Ms Emerton said. “There was definitely an argument for maintaining the wetlands as part of the urban green belt.”

Most speakers at the symposium focused on common themes such as a strategic rather pragmatic approach, a transboundary outlook and a shift in focus from single rivers to the whole of the water cycle.

Nick Davidson was questioned about Australia’s ‘appalling record’ on the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands by an audience member.

He replied Australia was not alone in struggling to maintain its wetlands in the face of drought and he would encourage the government to take care of Ramsar sites which include Fivebough and Tuckerbil Wetlands in New South Wales.

He was also asked whether bad planning had lead Australia into its current drought and said Australia had been quite forward thinking but decisions were made on the best available knowledge at the time.

“The world has become a less predictable. You can do the best decision making and planning in the world on the basis of what is happening now, but in five years time you may find you don’t have any water and you are in extreme drought,” Mr Davidson said.

“Sometimes what really helps to focus the mind is a big disaster. When you’ve really got a problem on your hands everybody comes together and looks for solutions. I’m not sure that’s the best way to manage the world overall but in reality, it is the case,” he said.

The 10th International Riversymposium & Environmental Flows Conference takes place in Brisbane from Monday 3 to Thursday 6 September 2007 and is part of *Riverfestival* – a 10-day annual celebration of Brisbane’s iconic river, its people, art, culture and environment from 31 August to 9 September, 2007.

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