

US politicians, European technicians stream toward Israeli-run water technology

By Max Schindler

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Water conference in Tel Aviv. (photo credit:WATERTEC)

With nearly 90% of wastewater recycled and reused in agriculture, Israel may be the only mostly desert country to have solved its water-scarcity problem.

That's why hundreds of business executives and agricultural experts crowded into the Tel Aviv Fairgrounds on Tuesday to view the latest in Israeli water conservation, desalinization and cybersecurity at this year's Water conference. This is a sure sign that Israeli agricultural technology trade ties remain strong despite the boycott movement making small splashes.

Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel addressed the attendees and announced a new academic partnership to focus on water research between Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Beersheba and Northwestern University in Chicago.

“We are bringing together the heartland of America with the Holy Land, we are bringing both the Mideast and the Midwest together and our view of abundance with your view of scarcity and hopefully something beautiful will come of that,” said Emanuel, who holds US and Israeli citizenship and was previously former-president Obama's chief of staff. Water research centers at both universities will combine forces, allowing their hydrologists, geologists and engineers to collaborate with their peers across continents.

Outside of the academic sphere, several European delegations were looking to learn from Israeli water conservation as their countries undergo increasing droughts and climate change.

The Italian government brought government ministers and business executives from 25 companies to see what Israeli technology they can bring back to the increasingly arid Italian Peninsula.

“Israel is really an example, first for the management of the water and the desalinization and recycling and to manage itself, for a place which didn’t have water, now Israel sells water to its neighbors. It’s a miracle,” said Paolo Sabbadini, managing partner of the Italian Division at Cukierman & Co. Investment House and who is helping to connect Israeli companies to Italian water providers.

Last spring was the driest for Italy in the post-war period as rainfall settled at 80% below normal. For the first time, Rome implemented severe rationing and halted water deliveries from its central acquire lake several hours each day. Until then, most Italians didn’t think twice about water scarcity, Sabbadini said.

Now, Israeli companies such as Mekorot – the national water carrier – are advising Italian public water agencies all over, from Sardinia to Milan, and they’re dispensing advice when it comes to reducing water leakage, recycling wastewater and installing monitoring sensors. Israeli water companies are also consulting Italian firms when it comes to cybersecurity, in an attempt to prevent hackers from disabling online sensors and gauges.

Sabbadini, who lived in Israel for 15 years as a child, added that pressure from BDS had tried to rupture business ties in the past between Israeli companies and Italian water suppliers.

“Two years ago, when Mekorot signed a memorandum of understanding with Acea, the municipal company of Rome which manages the water, some of the political parties boycotted the MoU.”

The Italian Ministry of Environment has been able to avoid some of the worst boycott pressure by maintaining a good relationship with the Palestinian Authority, Sabbadini added. And in Italy, he seeks to preempt any political challenges by monitoring the web.

“We are working very silently, not to make so much noise but to see if there’s a problem. If there’s a problem, then we call the Israeli Embassy in Rome,” Sabbadini said.

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