

Country Water Action: Philippines National Regulator Takes Drastic Measures Against Big-Time Commercial Water Abusers (July 2006)

- [Seeking Attention](#)
- [Cash Strapped](#)
- [Dire Threat](#)
- [Mixed Results](#)
- [Related Links](#)

SEEKING ATTENTION

Ramon Alikpala flails his arms wildly. He looks like a man drowning in the very water he is trying to conserve. Every two weeks or so the Executive Director of the Philippine National Water Resources Board (NWRB) issues a threat against Manila's businesses warning them against waste or the illegal extraction of well water.



Asked why he shouts so much, he says: "I'm only trying to create awareness, because one, nobody knows we exist, and two, people don't know there is a law!"

The agency on paper is an all-powerful body that regulates water use across the entire country of over 7,200 islands. It enforces the water code, sets tariffs for water utilities, and is just about to take over the Local Water Utility Authorities. The law is the 1976 National Water Code, the Implementing Rules and Regulations (IRR) of which Alikpala managed to get amended and approved as law in April 2005.

[Top](#)

CASH STRAPPED

But the NWRB is an agency tucked away in the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, well away from public view. It has such a pitiful budget that it couldn't afford to have the amended IRR gazetted and published in local newspapers as part of the enforcement process. So, the very public it is trying to reach doesn't even know there is such a law.

Alikpala has to resort to issuing threats that he will haul water wasters to court and force them to cap their wells, because he says, "the diminishing water from aquifers is critical." In Metro Manila—which has a population of over 12 million—the aquifers are drying up. "There is saline intrusion in our aquifers. I have to create awareness to save them," he stressed.

He says 30-40% of businesses in Manila have no permits to extract water from their wells. He has sent out warnings to five-star hotels like the Shangri-La Makati, expensive department stores, high-profile businesses and even golf courses—all of whom never applied for well water extraction permits. Alikpala wants them all to close their wells and sign up for piped water from the two water concessionaires—Maynilad Water and Manila Water Services.

[Top](#)

DIRE THREAT

Although these two water concessionaires have been grappling with infrastructure problems, such as the replacement of leaking pipes, and can't deliver piped water to all households and businesses in Metro Manila, their source is renewable surface water—whereas the draining of the aquifers now poses an ecological threat to the very foundations upon which the capital stands.



In order to demonstrate his determination, Alikpala recently led a team that forcibly entered the Landmark Department Store in the heart of the capital's business district of Makati and sealed off its deep water well, accusing the store of illegally tapping the water despite a closure order last year. "We need to send a strong message to violators that we will not stand for unregulated deep wells," he said.

The amended IRR calls for increased penalties—from a paltry 1,000 pesos (US\$20) per violation to a daily fine of 1,000 pesos as long as water continues to be drawn illegally. Alikpala wants all businesses to apply for permits and be issued meters to monitor the extraction of well water. "Oh, they are giving me all kinds of excuses why they don't want to connect to Maynilad or Manila Water," he said. "Of course they don't want to pay for piped water. I'm going to price well water slightly higher than treated (piped) water as a disincentive."

[Top](#)

MIXED RESULTS

His threats to punish them so far have worked—many have promised to comply. But he fears the NWRB may not be able to sustain the campaign to regulate water use, unless it gets more manpower to implement the law. And he notes that 82% of the country's raw water is used by farmers in the countryside for irrigation. Yet, they pay a fixed cost regardless of the amount used. There is no incentive to conserve, he points out.



The next step the NWRB has to take is to overhaul the National Water Code law drastically in 2006. The board has enlisted the nongovernmental organization, the Philippine Water Partnership, in an advisory role to draw up new rules to make all water users pay for the volume of water extracted and consumed—whether from surface water or well water. This will apply to everyone—be they urban households, farmers, or even concessionaires.

Also under consideration are time-limited permits. At present, these are granted in perpetuity. There are also plans to form regional councils so that local governments and stakeholders will protect and regulate their own water resources. "This will be a policy decision," Alikpala admits. "It won't happen overnight. Maybe in 3 years or so the government's got to put in measures."

There's an old British proverb: "You don't miss the water till the well runs dry." The situation is serious. Scientists have warned that the Philippines will reach crisis point by 2025 if the current wastage is not stopped. Yet, major commercial consumers don't appear to be listening. No wonder Mr. Alikpala waves his arms around in frustration.