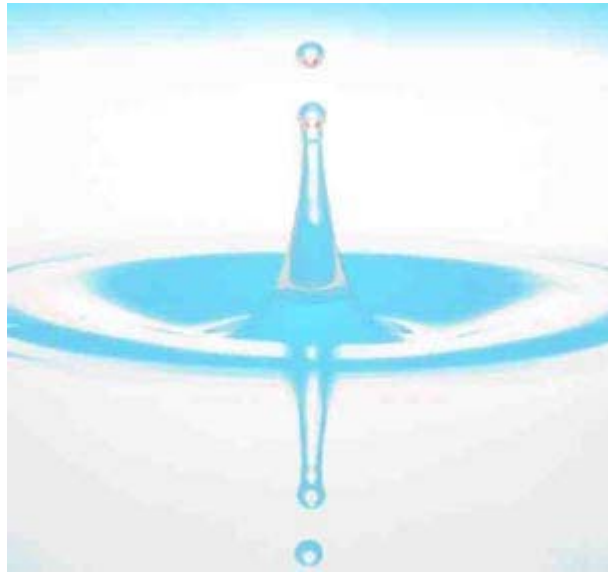


## Panel probes water and human security

by Geoff McMaster



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**January 31, 2007** - Edmonton - With a throat parched from a 33-hour flight home from Nairobi, Maude Barlow's talk on global water scarcity took on a visceral immediacy that was hard to ignore. Having just returned from a meeting of the World Social Forum, Barlow said she witnessed the birth of the African Water Network - an emerging, grassroots social movement fighting the corporate hold on "blue gold." Like so many struggles on that beleaguered continent, she said, this is also one of life and death.

She described unprecedented desertification, whole villages at the behest of corporations profiteering from the sale of potable water, children playing in grossly polluted ponds, and hospital beds filling up with victims of water-borne disease.

In fact half of the hospital beds on Earth are now devoted to the scourge of water-related disease, she said, arguing that the crisis deserves the same attention as its related cousin, climate change. "The planet is drying up, and we are seeing massive desertification," said Barlow. "We keep hearing about climate change as being only about greenhouse gas emissions. And of course, I don't in any way diminish the importance of getting that under control. But the way we are mistreating and abusing and moving and diverting water is also a major cause of climate change, and I really hope we can put these two issues together, because actually they are the same issue."

Barlow's talk was part of an International Week panel presentation on water and human security, which also included Dr. David Schindler, the U of A's best-known expert on water; Jim Carter, president and CEO of Syncrude; and Kori Chilibeck, founder, president and CEO of Earth Water International.

Barlow said she was distressed to see how much worse the scarcity of water has become since the publication of her book, *Blue Gold*, five years ago. Seventy-five per cent of India's surface water, 80 per cent of China's, the massive majority of South America's and every single lake and river in Africa are now polluted beyond human use.

As a result, countries are now mining for groundwater, and transporting it huge distances to where it's needed.

"The ecological story is now very, very clear," said Barlow. "We are polluting our surface waters around the world to the extent that we're mining ground water far faster than it can be replenished."

Governments and international institutions, such as the United Nations and the World Bank, are abdicating their responsibility to private corporations, which hold that "the most precious commodity on Earth" should be traded on the open market instead of ensured as a basic human right, she said.

Barlow added that there is now a movement afoot to establish an international water cartel, much like an oil cartel, "so that one day every single drop of water will be owned by a corporation." But at the same time there is also a new global, grassroots movement fighting back. "We believe water belongs to the Earth and all species, that it's a public trust, and that it should be public service and a human right, which should not be denied anyone for lack of ability to pay, and further should not be appropriated for profit," said Barlow.

She added that "we should all be ashamed to know" that Canada's government is one of the few opposing the universal right to water at the United Nations. This position was the policy of the Liberal government under Chrétien and Martin and has remained the position of the current Harper government, she said, to avoid contradicting the North American Free Trade Agreement "which clearly names water as a good."

Also on the panel, insisting that his company must "earn its social license to operate," Syncrude CEO Jim Carter gave a presentation outlining strides made in using less water, and recycling more, in the process of separating oil from the tar sands. He also underscored the huge economic contribution Syncrude, and other oil companies like it, are making to the economy of Alberta and Canada. And he claimed there is "negligible impact from oil sands on aquatic ecosystems in Northeastern Alberta."

Kori Chilibeck, a U of A graduate who started a bottled-water company devoting its profits to help people access water, talked about a new form of social entrepreneurship that defines shareholders as "every man, woman and child in the most desperate of situations."

Dr. David Schindler outlined research published last spring showing that the Canadian prairies are facing an unprecedented water crisis due to a combination of climate warming, increased human activity and historic drought. He said that despite the drought of the 1930s, the 20th century was actually one of the wettest on record and that the next generation will find out "what water scarcity is really all about."

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