

# China Environmental Crises, Costs Rising

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SHANGHAI (AP) — Environmental accidents are on the rise in China, mainly due to chemicals industry-related traffic and industrial mishaps, and the costs of such damage to the economy are rising.

China handled 542 environmental accidents in 2011, the newspaper China Daily reported, citing statistics from the Ministry of Environmental Protection and ministry officials.

The report gave no comparative figures, but the number appears a steep increase from 135 such accidents in 2008, 171 in 2009 and 156 in 2010, according to the website of the ministry-affiliated newspaper China Environment News.

Almost two-thirds of the disasters resulted from traffic accidents, such as trucks overturning and spilling hazardous loads, and from industrial production, the newspaper reported, citing Ling Jiang, deputy director of the ministry's department of pollution prevention and control.

Ministry officials did not immediately respond to phoned and faxed requests for comment Tuesday.

Public anger over heavy pollution, explosions at chemical plants, oil spills and other disasters has been mounting, raising pressure on the government to do more to counter environmental damage resulting from three decades of laxly regulated industrialization.

The frequency of such mishaps has left many alarmed.

On Tuesday, officials in Nantong, a city about 100 kilometers (66 miles) northwest of Shanghai on the Yangtze River, scrambled to douse rumors that a chemical tanker had capsized, contaminating the city water supply. In the meantime, residents rushed to buy bottled water, according to local media reports.

Nantong's civil maritime bureau and its water supply company issued notices saying there was no such accident. The source of the rumors was unclear.

The Chinese Academy for Environmental Planning, which is affiliated with the ministry, reported recently that its most recent estimate of the annual cost of environmental damage was 1.4 trillion yuan (\$220 billion) in 2009, up 9.2 percent from the year before.

Such figures likely exclude costs to public health and lost productivity from farmland contaminated with heavy metals.

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China has cracked down on production of lead-acid batteries and other products involving heavy metals, though the results of an investigation into a cadmium spill last month suggest many areas have done little to clean up factories that often are major sources of jobs and tax revenues.

Authorities said they punished nine local officials in connection with the spill of about 20 tons of highly toxic cadmium into rivers in southwestern China's Guangxi region.

Environmental officials say the spill in Guangxi's Hechi city has been contained, but investigations into its cause uncovered many violations of environmental standards. Smelters in the region, a major mining and chemicals production base, reportedly have been ordered to eventually close down or relocate.

Initially, officials in Liuzhou, a city of more than 3 million downstream from the spill, said they could rely on groundwater if levels of cadmium in their water supply rose too high. Residents alarmed over possible risks rushed to buy bottled water.

But on Tuesday, reports said the city planned to instead build a new reservoir along another river upstream to ensure safer supplies.

That news followed reports that the porous karst formations in the region, which are riddled with underground caves, were also contaminated by pollution from smelters, chemicals plants and other industries.

More than 200 million rural Chinese lack access to safe drinking water.

According to Chen Mingzhong, an official of the Ministry of Water Resources, only 46 percent of the 178,000 kilometers (110,609 miles) of rivers and lakes monitored by the ministry meet environmental standards, which vary depending on the body of water, the China Daily report said.

A government target calls for nearly 80 percent of such waterways to meet standards by 2020, with full compliance by 2030. Local officials are subject to punishment for failing to meet those targets, the report said.

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