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Soak It In



Last September, the Chinese government agreed to develop 16 “sponge cities”—modern urban areas employing a series of advanced technologies for rain-

water harvesting and reuse.

The program initially was developed to help mitigate the country’s growing flooding problem, which has more than doubled since 2008, according to The Economist. And while some Chinese cities struggle with flooding, others are experiencing severe water shortages. The sponge city concept could potentially solve both problems.

The premise is simple: Rather than divert rainwater, these cities will capture and make use of it. Whether that means replenishing aquifers, using it for irrigation, or flushing toilets with it, the storm water will be used in a way that is beneficial for both the residents of the city and the environment. The sponge cities will employ combinations of green roofs, permeable pavement, bioswales and other green infrastructure practices to meet their goal of capturing 60% of storm water falling in each city, according to The Guardian.

Of course, a project of this size begs the question: Who is paying for it? Each of the 16 pilot cities will receive 400 million RMB (\$63 million) every year for three years

from the Chinese government to fund these green infrastructure projects. But program creators and financial experts alike say that for the longer term, additional funding will be needed, and to expand this program to the nearly 130 other cities preparing to join, public-private partnerships will be key. Participation from the private sector could lead to extra funds, more exposure and access to more innovative technologies.

It will be interesting to watch the progress of this program. If significant results are documented, it could serve as a model for other cities and countries around the world struggling with similar climate conditions and prompt an increase in government funding for these types of green projects.

Throughout this issue, we see projects that capture rainwater for reuse or storage. From a Milwaukee farmers market (p. 32) to a public pool parking lot in Iowa (p. 10) to a street at an Indianapolis university (p. 14), municipalities and private entities alike are creating their own small-scale sponge cities, aiming to protect local waterways and make the most out of this natural resource. **SWS**

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