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From dialogue to delivery: Financing water security in Central Asia after RES 2026

Shakhboz Akhmedov

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The inaugural Regional Ecological Summit (RES 2026), held in Astana from 22 to 24 April under the theme "A Shared Vision for a Sustainable Future," brought together more than 1,500 delegates from across the region and an estimated 8,000 visits over three days. The Plenary Session featured the Presidents of the five Central Asian countries together with the leaders of Armenia, Georgia, Mongolia, and the Prime Minister of Azerbaijan. The Summit was organized by the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources of Kazakhstan in partnership with the United Nations and a wider coalition that included UNEP, UNECE, FAO, OECD, IRENA, IEA, the World Bank, ADB, and IWMI. The event focused on eight priority areas and delivered 58 sessions, including 21 high-level sessions and 4 country sessions.

Platforms of this nature matter. Environmental challenges in Central Asia - the retreat of the Aral Sea, the falling level of the Caspian, accelerated glacier melt, desertification, and transboundary water stress - are inherently regional and cannot be solved through bilateral channels alone. The Summit produced a Joint Declaration by the Heads of State of Central Asia on "Environmental Solidarity of Central Asia," approved the Regional Program of Action with UN agencies for 2026–2030, and brought together 51 outcome documents - 13 memorandums, 16 joint statements and declarations, 16 regional and country initiatives, and 6 investment projects. The accompanying RES 2026 EXPO opened with 17 memorandums worth more than USD 2.3 billion signed on day one alone, and Euronews reported a further EUR 2 billion in commitments toward the regional green transition. These are not trivial outputs.

A recurring question among participants was whether dialogue would translate into tangible results. Presidents framed the Summit as a movement "from ambition to action," and the agenda was deliberately structured around that pivot. The priority now therefore is to translate this political consensus into well-financed, time-bound, and effectively monitored projects on the ground.

Water, once again, at the forefront

If RES 2026 had a single dominant theme, it was water. Speakers across multiple sessions described water no longer as a sectoral issue but as a system-forming factor determining the trajectory of economic development and the character of regional cooperation. The supporting evidence is hard to dismiss: irrigated agriculture contributes up to 28% of national

GDP across the five countries, hydropower provides over 20% of regional energy, and most of the irrigation and water-supply infrastructure underpinning these economies is more than 40 years old.

One striking new dimension surfaced in the financing discussions: the water footprint of the digital economy. Some recent estimates suggest that a 100-word AI query may consume around half a liter of water once data-center cooling and power generation are accounted for, with annual consumption across major data centres equivalent to that of a small city. For economies already losing 60 percent of irrigation water before it reaches the field, layering AI-era demand reframes water as a constraint on, not just a beneficiary of, the digital transition.

Several Summit moments crystallized the water-first turn. Kazakhstan formally launched consultations on establishing an International Water Organization under the UN on 23 April, with the aim of feeding into the UN Water Conference 2026 in Abu Dhabi. A Central Asia–Caspian ministerial session co-hosted with WHO addressed the public health legacy of the Aral Sea, and the EU-Central Asia Team Europe Initiative on Water, Energy and Climate - already worth EUR 4.8 billion - held a high-level meeting in parallel. National reform programs presented in the margins were equally consequential: Uzbekistan's approved three-year water infrastructure program of around USD 5 billion, Kazakhstan's 2024–2030 Water Sector Concept covering 160 measures and a USD 7 billion budget, and concessional credit lines for water-saving technologies introduced by Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan.

The water financing session: Diagnosis and reframing

Among the sessions, the discussion on water financing stood out as the most consequential. It also most directly addressed the "dialogue-to-delivery" test. The session was co-hosted by the Economic Research Institute (ERI) of Kazakhstan, with analytical leadership from IWMI and IAMO. The session's strength was that it refused both extremes: it neither treated water as a technical-engineering problem to be solved by more pipes, nor as a financing problem to be solved by more capital. It treated it, accurately, as a problem of project preparation and governance that determines whether capital can flow at all.

The diagnostic numbers were sobering. Across the five countries, annual water-sector investment needs are estimated at USD 5.0–6.3 billion against currently mobilized financing of USD 3.0-3.7 billion - a regional gap of USD 2.0–2.6 billion per year, or 40–45 percent of needs. Globally, water still attracts only 3–5 percent of international infrastructure finance, and within the regional gap, irrigation modernization alone accounts for 45-50 percent. On the demand side, almost 60 percent of agricultural withdrawals are lost before reaching the field, irrigation service fees recover only around 20 percent of infrastructure costs, and budget subsidies the sector by more than USD 300 million annually.

The session's most important contribution, however, was its reframing. The core argument is clear. The challenge is not mobilizing finance. It is preparing integrated, climate-resilient water investments that are bankable, implementation-ready, and embedded in credible service delivery reform. What works is a synchronized package - tariff reform paired with metering, infrastructure rehabilitation, institutional enforcement, and visible service improvement. One concrete pathway that emerged repeatedly is the water–energy hybrid: water infrastructure linked to power generation under a single corporate vehicle - with audited accounts, ISO standards, and transparent reporting - becomes substantially more bankable than a pure irrigation or water-supply asset, and can access Green Climate Fund and other climate-aligned streams.

From dialogue to action: What comes next

Platforms such as RES 2026 are necessary but not sufficient. Their justification, in the end, lies in what happens between summits, not at them. For the water agenda specifically, three measures of seriousness will become visible over the next months: whether the proposed UN International Water Organization gathers traction beyond Astana; whether the 2026–2030 Regional Programme of Action is matched by costed implementation plans; and whether the region builds a pipeline of bankable, climate-resilient water projects capable of absorbing the financing already on the table. A USD 2 billion annual gap is not, on its own, a capital problem, it is a preparation and coordination problem. The session closed with a reframing worth carrying out of Astana: water is not a cost - it is an investment in the future. Most of the mechanisms required to operationalize that reframing already exist; they need translation into national legislation, regional inter-state agreements, and a visible project pipeline. The political appetite is genuine. The harder work begins now.