

SPEECH BY COBUS DOWRY MINISTER FOR AGRICULTURE IN THE WESTERN CAPE

LAUNCH OF THE WATERWISE CAMPAIGN OF THE WESTERN CAPE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE 4 SEPTEMBER 2007

As a responsible Government we need to ensure that the we use and manage the water resources of the Province in such a way that we grow and transform the economy of the Western Cape to the benefit of all the people.

We cannot have water services without water resources, which also support the needs of a growing economy. We are confronted by the major challenges of managing our scarce resources and extending service delivery to previously excluded communities. At the same time we also have an obligation to research and mitigate the vagaries of climate change in order to adapt to these changing circumstances without losing productivity in the sector.

Drought and the need for water produces a complex web of impacts that spans many sectors of the economy and reaches well beyond the area of experiencing physical drought. This complexity exists because water is integral to our ability to produce goods and provide services.

It is not only the livestock and wheat industries that are impacted upon by a lack of water. During the drought situation in 2005 studies proved that the deciduous fruit industry would bear approximately 67% of the burden on the horticultural sector. Deciduous fruit production cannot cope with drought conditions to the same extent as wine grapes for instance and was therefore more susceptible to negative impacts.

The negative impact when you have to apply water restrictions has a negative multiplying factor on the total agricultural sector. Table grape producers, for example, were among the biggest losers with water restrictions in the Olifants river irrigation district. Losses in production were high, such as in the Hexriver-valley where on 1,5 million export cartons of table grapes and 1 million for the Berg river area were registered. The production losses for the Hexriver-valley were estimated on R180 million and R100 million for the Berg river area.

This phenomena obviously also impacts negatively on agricultural employees. It was feared that some 2 075 permanent and 2 746 seasonal jobs could be lost in the wine, table grape and deciduous fruit industries alone, resulting in some R37, 4 million income loss to these

households.

As a responsible government we cannot ignore these warning lights and therefore the Department of Agriculture in the Western Cape attends to these needs on a continual basis by engaging in research on the process of Multi-Criteria Decision Analysis (MCDA) in water resource management.

Although not a new concept, current research applies the process over time and within a regional context; compared to where specific projects with a localised context were targeted in the past. Current research challenges conventional beliefs regarding the total cost of traditional expensive supply options (like desalination of seawater and recycling to potable standard) with the hypothesis that if it was possible to quantify the total cost of a water management alternative, conventional supply alternatives (for example the construction of new dams) could well be more expensive compared to seawater desalination or recycling to potable standard.

The quality of water in our rivers plays a major role in the creation of a home for all in the Western Cape: It is a fact however that the quality of the water in our rivers varies from excellent to very poor, depending on the location and the activities taking place adjacent to the rivers or in the catchments areas of the rivers.

The pollution of the Berg river for instance is a topic that has received a lot of media coverage over a period of time and serious concerns have been expressed regarding the effect that the polluted water can have on the people using the water.

The water is being used by farming communities for drinking water as well as for irrigation of export fruits and vineyards.

It must be remembered that when we export our fruit and table grapes we must conform to the specifications of the importing countries and not our own specifications, which seem to be much lower.

Agriculture, industry and rapid urban growth have taken their toll on water-scarce South Africa's river systems, leaving almost three-quarters of them endangered or critically endangered. This is among the findings of a report containing the first-ever national assessment of biodiversity across the country's marine, freshwater, estuarine and terrestrial environments. The National Spatial Biodiversity Assessment (NSBA) 2004 report contains the findings and recommendations of a multi-disciplinary team of experts led by the South

African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI).

The Department of Water Affairs and Forestry is responsible to act against second and third tier of government organisations and private individuals that do not comply with the conditions of their permits regarding the return of treated sewage water to rivers as well as to prevent other types of pollution, as mentioned above.

It is in the public interest that Water Affairs consistently apply the Act that is in place (the National Water Act, 1998) and do the necessary policing and prosecute transgressors, irrespective of who they are.

The question follows: Who will act on behalf of the many people that rely on the water from these polluted rivers as their sole supply of drinking water, if we as the Government do not fulfil our obligation to apply the National Water Act and prosecute polluters of our scarce water resources?

Apart from taking legal action against polluters and ensuring that permit holders remain within the conditions of their permits, some short term solutions need to be put in place to buy some time to rectify urgent existing problems and provide permanent sustainable solutions.

Municipalities sometimes create the impression that they are addressing the problem, whilst their efforts in fact contribute very little to solve the problem. Paying people to pick up plastic bags on the banks of our rivers for example is a praiseworthy effort and does create a clean environment, but it does not provide a sustainable solution to the water pollution problem.

It must be remembered that plastic bags in the water cannot make people sick or even kill people as is the case with all the harmful organisms and bacteria that end up in our rivers due to sewage pollution.

Joint and focused efforts by all relevant parties are required to protect our rivers and thus our scarce water resources and ensure the safety of all the people using the water, whether it is for basic human requirements or for irrigating crops to provide food for our people or for irrigating export fruit and table grapes, that in turn provides much needed jobs.

Irrigation agriculture accounts for 50% water use in South Africa. Due to the increased demand by the various water users from scarce water resources, the WCDA Sustainable Resource Management Programme

undertook various initiatives to facilitate integrated solutions with other stakeholders to develop and promote engineering technologies to ensure optimum and sustainable water utilisation in the greater community. The objectives are regional water investigations and studies, infrastructure development for improved water management and the promotion of efficient on-farm irrigation practises.

Water will in future become a very scarce commodity and only with proper planning, long-term strategies and responsible usage will we be able to be assured of water for the generations to follow.

The protection and sustainable use of our natural resources of water and land are enhanced by the implementation of LandCare projects of the Department that have the aim of promoting sustainable resource management and concentrate on poverty alleviation, capacity building and awareness. Area Wide Planning of large areas

within the Western Cape is a holistic and pro-active planning tool to link the farm plans with area plans that reflect the future desired condition of the resources within the Province.

I am excited about this water wise campaign that will run from September to December 2007 and that will have its focus on the youth, as well as the farming and broader communities in order to protect this valuable and scarce commodity.

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