

Extended National Water Week Programme
Speech by Mrs LB Hendricks, Minister of Water Affairs
and Forestry
O R Tambo District Municipality
The Rotary Stadium, Mthatha
26 March 2009

Programme Director

Honourable Premier

MEC of Local Government, Housing and Traditional Affairs

Executive Mayors

Councillors

Municipal Managers

Distinguished Guests, Officials, Ladies and Gentlemen

Good Morning, I am very pleased to be here today not only to reflect on the achievements of Government, but also to consider the work that still has to be done to meet our target for universal access to water and sanitation and more importantly to also announce an important intervention to deal with the current and very unacceptable water quality

problems that we are experiencing in the OR Tambo District Municipal area.

Although our Government has made great progress in providing our people with water and sanitation in various parts of the country, and has already far exceeded the internationally agreed 2015 Millennium Development Goals, of serving half of the population who were without water and sanitation in 1990; our challenge remains enormous and urgent to provide services to those communities that have not yet been reached. We have set ourselves a target of providing universal access to a basic water supply and sanitation by the year 2014. We are confident that we will achieve this target, but I must stress the importance that all spheres of government must commit to maximising the use of the available resources to ensure that everyone in this country has access to both water and sanitation by the target date.

While we are busy with this programme, we are well aware of the impact that the lack of proper sanitation and safe drinking water has had on our people, and in particular how this has contributed to the loss of lives through cholera in some parts of the country, with Limpopo and Mpumalanga

being the worst affected areas. We, as caring Government, cannot and will not tolerate/accept any loss of life due to any form of waterborne disease, be it cholera, typhoid or any other waterborne diseases. That is one of the reasons why I am here today to announce further support to the DM to deal with the challenges of failing and ageing infrastructure. This intervention will however not achieve the expected outcome if National, Provincial and Local Government do not take up their joint responsibility to ensure that the basic needs of our people, including water and sanitation are met, a responsibility which goes far beyond only the provision of toilets and taps, and more importantly includes the proper operation and maintenance of the water supply and sanitation systems which a primary responsibility of the municipality, but where they have to work together with the residents/communities. The municipality on the one hand must secure and efficiently use its resources to deliver sustainable services (both in terms of quantity and quality), while on the other hand the communities have the responsibility to protect the infrastructure and make sure that there is no vandalism and misuse and that water is conserved. This of course includes rivers which must not be used as a convenient place to throw our rubbish. We have to

protect our water resources, remember that everyone one of us lives “downstream” and are impacted by the way those who live “upstream” treat the resource.

Let me for a moment, use this opportunity, to reflect on the cholera situation in our country. Cholera is a waterborne disease and some of the outbreaks are directly linked to the lack of sanitation facilities or the poor operations and maintenance of Waste Water Treatment works. The effluent from these treatment plants does not always get properly disinfected and therefore contaminates our rivers with unsafe bacteria and viruses. This lack of proper water treatment has also been the case here in the Eastern Cape and this of course also poses a serious health hazards to communities.

Much as we have seen a significant decrease in the number of reported new cholera cases particularly where the outbreak has been the most serious in Limpopo and Mpumalanga, we are still very worried about the fact that there are new cases reported every day and some of these in areas where we have not had cases reported before. It is

our aim to ensure that through our intervention programmes we arrest the situation as soon as possible and that we take action now to eliminate the potential for any outbreaks in other parts of the country.

While we implement our intervention programmes to deal with the infrastructure, we also have to improve our health and hygiene practices. I say this because I am concerned, that as reported to me in other parts of the country, that many households are also not practising good health and hygiene which also gives rise to the spread of disease in the water stored, the food being prepared and through contact as a result of unwashed hands (the human to human spread of cholera). This further illustrates the need for government especially at a local level to look at service delivery in a more holistic manner, with municipalities working much more closely with communities to contain the diseases and to prevent its spread.

At the outset, I must recognize that the OR Tambo District has been monitoring Drinking Water Quality on a monthly basis, and reporting their results to my Department, I am however very concerned, firstly, at the decrease in the number of samples being taken by the Municipality (a

decrease of 60%) and secondly, at the increase in the number of samples which show the presence of E-coli (from an average of 9% in 2008 to 26 % in 2009). The presence of E-coli is a clear indicator of the state of your infrastructure and shows that you are not putting enough effort into making sure that the water is disinfected. This has to be dealt with as a matter of urgency as communities are being put at risk, a situation which we cannot and must not tolerate. Water and sanitation services are after all a constitutional and legislated responsibility of this municipality. The OR Tambo District Municipality must therefore take very urgent action to deal with the state of failures and ensure that adequate resources (both human and financial) are allocated to perform the functions and operate and maintain the infrastructure..

Apart from the problems in this DM, I am generally very concerned about the number of cases of non-compliance of water treatment and wastewater treatment plants by other municipalities and role players. This non compliance just serves to make the situation worse and threatens both human health and the environment. I have instructed my officials to take swift action to ensure that there is

compliance with the legislation, and where appropriate, to provide support to municipalities to rectify problems. Where there is a total disregard of compliance, directives will be issued to municipalities, the private sector, individual farmers, and other government departments with the aim of ensuring that our water resources are protected and utilised efficiently for the benefit of all. Failure to comply with the directives could lead to legal action being taken. We will also continue to monitor and assess the quality of drinking water provided to consumers through our nation wide water quality monitoring programme and identify “hot spots” where it may be necessary to intervene.

I have learnt with concern that there are a number of waste water treatment plants in this district municipal area are effectively dysfunctional. Clearly, this is unacceptable and must be addressed very urgently.

We are a Government at work, so what have we done to deal with some of these problems which I have just referred to? Firstly, I have been informed that the OR Tambo District Municipality has allocated an amount of R7 million, secondly, the Provincial Department of Local Government, and

Traditional Affairs has provided an amount of R10.6 million to the Municipality to upgrade infrastructure and rehabilitate pump stations, and thirdly, I am please to advise you that I am allocating a further R25 Million to the Municipality specifically to deal with the waster water treatment works which serves the town of Mthatha. This is quite clearly a demonstration of the three spheres of Government coming together, and pooling their resources to ensure that we are able to effectively deal with the challenges we face as a result of ageing and failing infrastructure. This is an ANC Government at work demonstrating that “Working together we can do more” in order to achieve a “better life for all”.

I would like to point out that the R25 million which I have just allocated is part of a much larger allocation of R88 million which I have made to the Province with the aim of assisting municipalities to accelerate infrastructure delivery (provide more access to water and sanitation); deal with sewer spillages (“hot spots”); and, implement water conservation and demand management.

Let me hasten to add that this is not the only intervention by my Department in the Province. The Department is also directly involved in the following activities:

- The all Towns reconciliation Study;
- The Mzimvubu Project;
- Water conservation and demand management;
- Trees for food programme;
- The War on Poverty programme; and,
- Staff retention and development programme

In order to ensure that Water Services Authorities have the correct water resources planning information available to complete their Water Services Development Plans and Integrated Development Plans, my Department has initiated the “All Towns Reconciliation Study” which is targeting 134 Eastern Cape towns, of which 48 were flagged as urgent, and 10 had been flagged as extremely urgent. The primary focus of the study is on the reconciliation of water requirements and the available resources for each town to be able to provide for current and future water needs in terms of the right “water mix” for each municipality, be it groundwater, surface water, return flows, re-cycling or

rainwater harvesting. A stand alone strategy will be developed for each town. which can eventually be rolled up into a district, provincial or catchment plan.

The Mzimvubu Project which was identified as one of the priority initiatives of the Eastern Cape Provincial Government in order to harness the water resources of the Mzimvubu River, the only major river in the country which is still largely unutilized. My Department plays a role in this project by contributing to the water-related inputs for any of the AsgiSA development proposals. The “Mzimvubu Development Zone” covers not only the Mzimvubu River catchment, but also neighbouring areas such as the Pondoland area and parts of the Mthatha River catchment. We are very aware of the responsibility we have to contribute to the success of the Mzimvubu Development Project in terms of the five pillars of the project, afforestation; Irrigation; Hydropower; water transfer and tourism.

Water Conservation and Demand Management is vitally important to reduce water wastage, to save money and to ensure that the province is able to “survive” the periodic droughts which occur. R500 000.00 has been committed to

Mthatha where the business plan has already been developed in relation to how water conservation and demand management issues may be addressed, and an expert has been assigned to assist this municipality with the implementation of Water Use Efficiency interventions.

The Trees for Food Programme as a poverty alleviation measure being implemented through our forestry programme continues to make an impact. Some 4 275 trees (80% fruit and 20 % indigenous) have been planted in the King Sabatha Dalindyebo Local Municipal Area. This project addresses, poverty alleviation by directly tackling issues of food security and malnutrition and should also be seen as an innovative public greening initiative that contributes provincially towards the improvement of the quality of life. The project will also provide low-income households and schools with fruit trees to plant at their homes.

My Department has also made a contribution to the launch of the Poverty WAR Room by the Province at Lubala Village (Lusikisiki) in ORT DM, where we have provided fruit trees for the whole community. Currently, 6 community members employed through the Working for Water Project are being

training for the provision of water and sanitation at the local school. The provision of water through boreholes to the community is at 60% completion and 6 of the 15 rain water harvesting tanks have been delivered.

My Department has also very recently provided support and funding in an amount of R1.152 million to the OR Tambo District Municipality to run a programme for staff retention and development. This programme includes an audit of all water and waste water treatment plants to assess the skills challenges; the recruitment of staff to fill the identified capacity needs in plant operations; as well as the assessment and identification of key Plant Managers to fill the gap between operations and maintenance. Learners have already been deployed to plants where they will be given SETA approved training and ten identified middle managers are being mentored. The programme also includes provision for monitoring and evaluation.

In conclusion, I would like to thank you all for attending this function today and making sure that by working together we are able to build a better life for all. I thank you.