

**ADDRESS BY MS. NOMVULA MOKONYANE, MINISTER OF WATER AND SANITATION AT THE XIV WORLD FORESTRY CONGRESS, INKOSI ALBERT LUTHULI ICC, DURBAN.**

***Your Excellencies,***

***Honourable Ministers***

***Members of Diplomatic Corps***

***Distinguished delegates from Governments, Private Sector and***

***Non -Governmental Organisations***

***Members of different Media Houses***

***Ladies and Gentlemen,***

*Let me take this opportunity to welcome you to South Africa and to the beautiful City of eThekwinini in the Province of KwaZulu Natal.*

*This Congress is taking place against the backdrop of the recently held World Water Week 2015 Conference which took place in Stockholm, Sweden, from the 23 – 28 August. The Conference reaffirmed the position that access to water plays a key strategic role in the socio-economic transformation of society.*

*South Africa is a water scarce country as evidenced by very little rainfall, skewed water distribution nationwide and low water levels in storage (dams and groundwater aquifers). This challenge posed by nature is*

*often exacerbated by human induced impacts such as unsustainable use of resources, pollution due to land-use and by climate change impacts. Various users compete for access to water against the backdrop of the fact that South Africa is a developmental state with resource based economy, poor communities that historically did not have access to water for livelihoods and water for the ecosystem including the forest ecosystem.*

*Historically, access to water in South Africa, like access to many rights and privileges, were determined by the dictates of race and gender.*

*Access to water was further complicated by the link between access to land and access to water. Since access to water is inextricably linked to access to land, the rights of Africans' access to water was further limited by their limited access to land, 13% of which was reserved to Africans under apartheid policies and legislation.*

*Ladies and Gentlemen,*

*As a country and the African continent in particular, access to water is greatly threatened by the loss of our forests. Over the past 50 years, about half of the World's original forest cover has been lost. The most significant cause for that being human beings' unsystematic use of*

*resource. When we take away the forests, it is not only the trees that go, the entire ecosystem begins to fall apart, with dire consequences for all of us.*

*There is no doubt that a close relationship exists between forests and our water resources. Water is the most vital element of all natural resources and is essential to life; however, sustainable forest management is essential to ensure the supply of good quality fresh water, to provide protection from natural hazards such as flooding or soil erosion and to protect the aquatic species.*

*Our forested catchments supply a high proportion of water for domestic, agricultural, industrial and ecological needs in both upstream and downstream areas. As countries, organisations and communities we are faced with a key challenge of maximising forests benefits without detriment to the water resources and ecosystem function.*

*For us to effectively address this challenge, there is a need to better understand the interactions between forests and water, for awareness raising and capacity building in forest hydrology, and for embedding this knowledge and research findings in our policies.*

*It is interesting that the 2015 World Forestry Congress has a Youth and Women Focus. The future Generation has borrowed us this planet and therefore sustainable use of natural resources is not negotiable. It is our responsibilities as governments and private sectors to educate and empower our women and youth about the importance of caring for our forests and the interaction between forests and water.*

*Ladies and Gentlemen,*

*Forests have an important role to play on water resources while water maintains forests - hence both are interdependent. Water sustains forests and forests ecosystem goods and services, while forests have potential to regulate flows, promote efficient water infiltration and minimise undesirable flood events. Forest cover also maintains good water quality by removing nutrients and by filtering water pollutants in the forest litter.*

*Ladies and Gentlemen*

*As a water stressed country, the Government of South Africa has passed the National Water Act which also makes provision for water users to apply for water use licenses. Since 1998, the South African*

*government has issued 1693 water use licenses for 35850 hectares but we have also noted the challenges with the issuing of water use licenses and for that reason, a Letsema Project is now in place focusing on fast tracking the issuing of water use licences.*

*Invasive alien plants pose a direct threat to the country's biological diversity, water security and ecological functioning of natural systems and the productive use of land. They consume 30% of our water that can be used in other spheres of development. For that reason, the South African Government has initiated the Working for Water Programme focusing on improving the integrity of our natural resources.*

*As we interrogate the water and forest subject over the next two days, it is important to acknowledge the role played by research on the subject towards investing in the sustainable future. As governments and private sectors we must continue to support research initiatives that aim to enhance understanding of water-forest interactions and interdependency to inform further derivation of co-benefits from both sectors.*

*This conference is expected to deliver on the improved knowledge of how best to improve on holistic approach in management of forests and water and to avoid forest degradation while ensuring efficient water use. Therefore, sharing of national and international experiences and best practice in the water and forests domain will add value to the discussions.*

***“Water is Life, sanitation is Dignity”.***

**Dankie**

**Ngiyabonga.**