

Vaal river crisis: Minister Gugile Nkwinti defended

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A senior government official has poured cold water on accusations against Water and Sanitation Minister Gugile Nkwinti over the Vaal River contaminated water crisis.

The department's deputy director-general, Anil Singh, last week appeared before the SA Human Rights Commission (SAHRC). Singh shifted the blame from Nkwinti to the Co-operative Governance and Traditional Affairs (Cogta) ministry.

"If you are to understand the complexity of the water value chain, the one way of looking at it is that the minister is the custodian of the nation's water resources," said Singh.

"But the minister doesn't have authority across the value chain. The services part of the value chain is dealt with by the minister of Co-operative Governance (Cogta)."

The department spent more than R3 billion on wastewater treatment schemes for the Emfuleni area in the 2011/12 financial year, but the treatment plants are still failing.

"I want to stress that the minister (Nkwinti) is indeed exercising his powers as a trustee and custodian to the department and our policy legislation and regulation. But there is complexity when we deal with local government.

"As much as we can issue directives against the municipality that is polluted, we also have to be careful of the intergovernmental relations framework. But we don't see the legislation as contradictory. The Constitution has three spheres of government, and they must work together," added Singh.

However, Singh said lack of leadership could lead to the dire situation remaining unresolved.

"A possible solution around the lack of authority which the minister has could be a transfer of functions from Cogta to Water and Sanitation in terms of water services authorities. But that's a difficult issue for us to navigate and is a political issue," said Singh.

Meanwhile, Metsi-a-Lekoa acting manager Sampie Shivambu admitted to the commission that ageing infrastructure could have led to the deteriorated situation. He revealed that the matter remained unresolved due to lack of capacity.

The situation is unchanged in Boipatong, with residents forced to live with pools of stinking water that flow through their streets. The Sunday Independent reported in

April that the situation was not only a health hazard, but caused suffering to schools and residential areas where the polluted water flows into the yards.

Boipatong resident Maditaba Mosia said she was forced to scoop water from her yard every day.

“I have been calling the municipality to fix the sewage drain. They came last week to fix it, but it burst again the moment they left. Now it’s flowing in my yard. Now it’s my everyday work to push this water out of my house,” said the 65-year-old.

Her neighbour, Belina Moeketsi, 84, reported falling ill as a result of the stinking water, which she, too, was forced to scoop from her house.

“Now I am coughing and having stomach aches. I suspect it is because of this sewage. I have no choice but to wake up every day and clean it from my yard. This is bad because the municipality is not helping us,” she said.

Another resident, Banny Mofokeng, said even tap water was beginning to have a nasty taste. “This situation is now worse. Sewage is running to every yard in this area. And the taste of water was not normal this morning. We want them to sort out this situation. We don’t care whether they are broke,” he said.

SAHRC head of advocacy in Gauteng Phillip Molekoa said they would launch a probe into the complaints.

“We have invited all stakeholders to come and account as a part of our investigations. We intend to compile a report and make recommendations to every department that is responsible.

“We will ensure that the recommendations give them specific tasks or responsibilities and time lines,” he said.

The Sunday Independent