

Address at the Arbor City Awards and Arbor Week Event
Ms Buyelwa Sonjica, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
Free State
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Honourable Premier, Ms Marshoff,
Honourable Members of the Executive Council,
His Worship the Mayor of Botshabelo,
Honourable Councillors,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen

Good Afternoon, Dumelang

The forestry sector has a potential to contribute at a large scale to the most urgent programme of government – which is that of creating employment and alleviating poverty.

Programme Director, in my view the potential and the capacity of the contribution that the forestry industry has to the lives of the poor majority and in boosting the economy has not been adequately tapped. The benefits are still being enjoyed by the few and the ownership of the industry is still in the hands of the few minorities.

Honourable Premier, I learn that this year is the 132nd year of Arbor Day, which as a country we have decided to observe over a week. As we celebrate Arbor Week, I would like us to reflect on the challenges that face the forestry industry especially in relation to the programme of the second decade of our democracy central to which is to further strengthen the first economy and build the second economy. This is a critical programme that addresses not only our own 2014 vision but it is a programme that aims to work towards the Millennium Development Goals, one of which is to halve poverty by 2015.

The programme of urban greening, the results of which we are celebrating today, is one of the efforts towards the realisation of these poverty alleviation targets. The urban greening programme is the most important tool that we use to deal with the legacy of apartheid. As we all know, the South African urban sector has always been divided between the “townships” and the “suburbs”, the former looks dusty and unhealthy while the latter looks healthier because of the green environment. This led to them enjoying a better quality of life because of the less polluted environment because trees give oxygen and absorb carbon dioxide.

The urban greening programme, I believe, is a direct response to this situation and is happening in the context of creating habitable human settlements for even the poorest.

Programme Director, we are making a clarion call for the forestry sector to respond to the programme of transformation of government. As a sector leader, our Department has put in place initiatives to facilitate the process of change. We therefore need to shift all our mindsets and unleash the potential of the forestry so that it contributes especially to promoting rural development and economic empowerment. Our Department will continue to strengthen this industry through afforestation, in other words planting trees where there were none – we have started in the Eastern Cape and KZN respectively. There is also a need to continue to restructure the industry and to that end, we are coming up with a BEE Charter to ensure the transfer of ownership to the previously excluded people.

We will also ensure that two identified nodal points will be given projects on “Trees for Poverty Alleviation” and R600 000 has been set aside for this. All of these efforts will help to boost the rural economy while addressing the ills of the second economy. We also note with appreciation that the industry is already offering a lot of employment especially to rural people.

Chairperson, today I have been charged with an important task of presenting the Arbor City Award – the main aim being to acknowledge and give recognition to local authorities for their

urban greening efforts. This very important event is organised by the Institute for Environment and Recreation Management (Africa) and sponsored by TOTAL SA. To both these valued partners I would like to say, on behalf of government, thank you for being part of the people's contract to create work and fight poverty. These are the kinds of partnerships we wish to encourage in order to most efficiently unlock the potential benefits of trees and forests as well as the entire industry.

The town or city that receives the Award will have demonstrated the i) sustainability of its urban greening programme; ii) the conservation and protection of existing trees and general green attractiveness of the town or city; iii) the provision of conservation areas and green open space corridors and a focus on urban greening initiatives in previously disadvantaged communities.

Most importantly, the winning town or city will have formed partnerships with communities, the private sector and NGOs, and will also be promoting the planting of indigenous plants.

Programme Director, I also want to emphasise that those cities or towns that will not be awarded will today, have also done all these things that I have just mentioned. As we are all familiar with the processes of competitions – all competitors will have worked hard and would have been equally good but the rules are that there should only be one overall winner. I must say that this is usually the most difficult task of any competition.

What is important today is that all the towns and cities that have entered the competition have contributed to the vision of our Department which embraces the broader vision of government and this is - **Forests are managed for people, and we need to create an enabling environment for economic and social development through sustainable forestry, especially at the local level.**

The idea of making an award to the city or town that has performed most notably in the area of urban greening also provides an opportunity to demonstrate in a tangible way, the intention of government to take forestry and other services closer to the people, through co-operative governance. The State President has announced a Convergence Plan, which seeks to strengthen the interaction and efficiency, which is achieved through co-operation between the different spheres of government. Our Department is no longer going to be directly involved in greening the entire country, but local government in partnership with the local communities will do this important task.

Our Department is moving purposefully towards devolving many of its water and forestry functions to other tiers of government and other agents, so as to make the services we offer more efficient and responsive to people's needs. We must however do this in such a way, that we actually achieve these objectives seamlessly and without causing service levels to deteriorate, otherwise this would defeat the entire objective of de-centralisation and co-operative governance.

Arbor Week and urban greening initiatives are such excellent examples of how other tiers of government and other stakeholders and role players, can achieve these objectives. As a Department we will play a facilitating and supportive role for such initiatives, especially when the tangible benefits to people's lives, such as those we are seeing here today, are so evident.

While the idea of moving annually from province to province to make the Arbor City award, is one that makes good sense, it does not negate the efforts of other provinces and local government structures during Arbor Week and in fact throughout the year. As I move around the provinces during this Arbor Week I witness a lot of efforts that have been made towards tree planting forest related initiatives.

It really is not surprising when one considers how important trees are in our lives, from providing fuel, food and medicines to millions, to supporting economic growth and enhancing the aesthetic quality of the areas in which we live.

One only has to cast one's mind back a few years or even now, to other areas of our country, where people live in dusty, treeless streets, away from their ancestral homes, where trees were a natural feature of the landscape and their lives, to realise how we have progressed in places like Botshabelo.

Here in Botshabelo, you have created and witnessed the benefits that trees in improving one's quality of life. Trees in residential areas can and do even drastically improve the monetary value of a property. There is often a spiritual or historical association with trees that seems universal among different cultures and segments of society. This is best demonstrated when someone senselessly cuts or damages a tree or trees which are important features in peoples' lives and there are appeals from various quarters to my department, to intervene.

Lastly it is my great pleasure to make the award this year to in the Category: Big Municipalities - Mangaung Local Municipality and in the Category: Small Municipalities - Naledi Local Municipality and while I do not wish to take anything away from them by saying this, I must say that the true value of the award is surely felt most by their citizens and the people of the other competing cities and towns, in the tangible results of their labours. It is truly a blessing when the results of your efforts are its own reward and this is a striking example of just such a case.

The Chinese have a saying that one plants trees for one's children, due to the long time it takes for trees to mature. Thus it requires vision and patience to engage in such activities and yet here we are today, already reaping the benefits of your vision and your efforts.

Well done Mangaung and Naledi Local Municipalities.

I THANK YOU