

**Address at the Arbor Week Event in Kwasokhulu, Kwambonambi**  
**Ms Buyelwa Sonjica, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry**  
**KwaZulu-Natal**  
**6 September 2004**

The Honourable Premier,  
MECs,  
Honourable District Mayor,  
Honourable Mayors and Deputy Mayors,  
Councillors,  
Amakhosi,  
Honourable Guests,  
Officials,  
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Programme Director, it is an honour and a privilege for me to be invited to this occasion which is an opportunity to witness the practical side of the vision of our Department, a vision that says "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.

Today we have come to celebrate the inception of a community initiative to use forestry products to earn a living. For the benefit of those people who do not know the background to this noble initiative – early this year, Makhulakancane which is a community led organisation in the area of Sokhulu, was awarded a license for felling and removal of indigenous timber including the protected tree species and the harvesting and removal of forest produce. We need to commend the members of Makhulakancane for their wise decision to use this timber to manufacture products that they may sell to earn a living. What is even more significant is that this will not only benefit the member of the organisation but will also create job opportunities to benefit the local communities. I have been assured that it is people from Sokhulu and the surrounding areas who will be working to convert the timber into products that can be sold to generate income.

The most appreciated element of this initiative and one that will add sustainability is that it is a partnership between government, the community and the private sector. The partnership of Richards Bay Minerals (RBM), which is the custodian of the area where the harvesting will be taking place, is highly valued. Richards Bay Minerals is not only assisting Makhulakancane by letting them harvest the timber but will also be giving other forms of support to the project.

We take this partnership in the spirit of Participatory Forest Management (PFM), an important policy of the department. This policy provides for cooperation between our department, the communities where there are forests and also companies that may be operating in those areas.

To make initiatives such as this one even more meaningful we, as government are counting on the support of people like yourselves and other companies. By this I mean that for these initiatives to be successful, there needs to be income generated and profits generated. That will only happen if the community and other companies buy from small companies such as this one to help them grow. This also requires that people, who have been serviced by small enterprises such as this one, also render assistance by providing feedback about the quality of the services or the products that they have acquired from such people.

Programme Director, we need to appreciate that these initiatives by community-based organisations and the private-public partnerships are the achievements of our first decade of democracy. 2004 is a celebration of ten years of government working towards improving the lives of the majority of this country; ten years of ensuring that all South Africans are provided with opportunities to be involved with income generating projects. We believe that we have managed to put the fundamentals in place and that we need to consolidate.

The potential of the forestry sector in contributing to the urgent programme of creating employment and alleviating poverty needs to be explored. The benefits of this sector are to a large degree still being enjoyed by the few and the ownership of the industry is still in the hands of the few minorities. As government, we will ensure that government goals of poverty eradication, employment, and sustainable forest management are fully addressed in sector activities. Our Department has put a process in place towards establishing a BEE Charter for the sector, under the provisions of the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act.

Honourable Premier, as we celebrate Arbor Week, which I am told we started observing in 1983, 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 also aims to work towards the Millennium Development Goals, one of which is to halve poverty by 2015.

Makhulancane is one example, through which we can demonstrate the role that Forestry can play in the alleviation of poverty. This is in addition to the fact that there are a number of people who are directly employed in Forestry. There are opportunities that exist within the sector where people can use forestry to empower themselves economically. Indeed there is unlimited scope of opportunities.

At this stage, I would like to acknowledge my colleagues in local government for the role they have played in ensuring that this initiative is showcased today. The Honourable Mayor of Uthungulu District Municipality, Mr BV Mthethwa, and his council for agreeing to be the hosting district municipality and the Honourable Mayor of KwaMbonambi Municipality for agreeing to be the host local municipality. This kind of relationship ensures that we live up to the ideals of our government, which advocates that we need to co-operate. 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.

We hope that this type of co-operation between government, the local communities and the private sector will not only be limited to this area. Other companies and communities can learn a great deal from initiatives such as this and the more of these initiatives we have the lower the levels of unemployment and poverty will be.

The Department of Water Affairs and Forestry is prepared to assist individuals or groups who wish to venture into the forestry sector. In some areas there are Forestry Extension Officers who are experts in the field of forestry and will gladly give advice. There are also regional offices where requests for assistance can be forwarded.

As we are all aware, the new vision of refocusing has made our Department a policy maker and a regulator, thus making us a sector leader. This means as a Department of Water Affairs and Forestry, we are devolving many of our function to the local government level of governance and this is important to make the services of government more efficient and responsive to people's needs. For instance this very Arbor Week campaign used to be implemented directly by our Department, but now the main implementation is done by local government in collaboration with NGOs, the private sector and other role players, under the guidance of DWAF. A process is in place to integrate forestry into IDPs and in the Provincial Growth and Development Plans.

As we celebrate or commemorate Arbor Week this year, my department has thus deemed it important to link the Arbor Week campaign with the celebration of ten years of freedom. The driving theme for this year is "Trees are our Heritage." Those who have been following our campaigns may wonder why we have chosen to use this theme as it was used for the 2003 campaign. As we celebrate ten years of freedom we thought it is important to also emphasise

that trees are part of our nature and our heritage. As we say this we have found it very important for us to look back at how far we have gone in empowering our communities and also at how we can contribute even further to this cause.

To all the youth gathered here today I urge you to stand up and seize the opportunities to advance yourselves. There are opportunities in the forestry sector and one does not need tertiary education to access them. You may be depriving this area of a nursery that will provide a supply for indigenous plants that may be planted in the different homes or even be sold to the department for use during its greening initiatives. Look around you and you might just spot an opportunity.

I have spoken a lot about the economic benefits that we may derive from forestry, but I would not like to see us losing sight of the other benefits that forests and plants bring to our lives. There are other basic benefits that we derive from plants and some of us were lucky to learn about this during our school days. Trees can save us from the harmful effects of carbon dioxide by absorbing it from the air that we breathe. While they absorb the harmful carbon dioxide, they release the clean air or the oxygen that we need so much for our bodies. It is these plants again that are a source of medicines. This is why it is important to seek advice before cutting down or destroying plants unless they are not indigenous.

Our department will always be committed to assisting the people of this region wherever possible in finding innovative means for economic development.

I wish Makhulakancane Community organisation the best of luck in their venture.

I THANK YOU.