

**Launch of the Ga-Mashishi Woodlands Project during Arbor Week**  
**Ms Buyelwa Sonjica, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry**  
**Seoke Primary School**  
**Limpopo**  
**2 September 2004**

Programme Director  
Premier, Mr Sello Moloto  
MEC, Ms Rosina Semanya  
Members of the Provincial Legislature  
Honourable Mayors  
Councillors  
Traditional Leaders  
Distinguished Guests  
Ladies and Gentleman.

We are gathered here today to remind ourselves about the important role trees play in the lives of many people. We are here to recommit ourselves as the citizens of this country and particularly this province to planting and conserving trees for a sustainable socio-economic development of our communities.

Chairperson, the National Arbor Week - Iviki Lezihlahla, is much more than just an opportunity to plant and maintain indigenous trees. It is the time when we need to reflect on how forestry can, and is, contributing to a better life for all in South Africa. It is the time during which we promote awareness for the need to plant and maintain indigenous trees throughout South Africa.

A good example is the Ga-Mashishi Woodlands project or the Indigenous reserve, as the people here prefer to call it. The woodlands project, which is a partnership between our Department and the local community, fits in very well with this year's theme for the National Arbor Week - "Trees are our Heritage".

The most important heritage we all remember in Africa is that trees have been places for community meetings; they have been used as classrooms and so forth. These are sad memories but memories that are an important part of our history. As we all know, a country that remembers its past is able to plan its future better.

The value of trees is also very diverse – they provide us with shade; they beautify and green our towns and cities; they soothe us; they provide us with shelter; they provide us with fruit, wood provides us with construction material and firewood.

For instance the Baobab tree which comes from this province (of Limpopo) is one of our National Orders and is awarded to the South African citizens for exceptional contribution towards building democracy and human rights, nation building and community service, peace and democracy.

We have also seen the practical economic benefits of trees / wood and this also in this province. The self-taught artist, Mrs Noria Mabasa, ranks amongst the best sculptors in the world – all from appreciating the value of wood / trees as well as benefiting economically.

Trees are certainly our friends, our heritage and we should always remember to value them. If we go back in history, we remember that one of the reasons that led to our colonization was the realization of the richness of Africa in natural resources and these include our forests, our trees and our vegetation. It is therefore important to note that the colonial and the apartheid regimes respectively, appreciating the value of trees, used trees to beautify their residential areas consequently dividing our communities along racial lines. This led to them enjoying a better quality, less polluted environment because trees emit oxygen and absorb carbon dioxide.

This legacy of apartheid still lives with us today. If you fly over most cities in South Africa, one can easily see the glaring spatial divide based on racial separation that existed before 1994. The urban sector has always been divided between the “townships” and the “suburbs”, the former look dusty and unhealthy while the latter look healthier because of the green environment. This is the challenge we need to overcome and create habitable human settlements for even the poorest.

Since 1994, the government's approach to forests and trees has been to recognise that trees are a national resource that requires protection and are to be used for the benefit of all South Africans.

Evidence points to the fact that Forestry represents a massive investment in the country and plays an important role in the rural- development strategy. Collectively the sector contributes about 600 000 jobs to the economy and each job created within the sector results in four others in supporting industries, through the multiplier effect.

The people of Ga-Mashishi and many other surrounding communities undoubtedly benefited from this woodlands project in terms of firewood, wild fruits and vegetables, browsing and grazing, fencing material, medicine, water and soil conservation. Most importantly, we trust that the community participatory forest management approach to the woodlands project assisted in meeting the local socio-economic and environmental to further benefit the local economic development.

The forestry industry is promoting rural development and economic empowerment through a small-grower afforestation programme. It is reported that during the past financial year, there were more than 20 000 small emerging black timber growers participating in the programme.

Programme director, to preserve our heritage and use it as the basis for taking the country forward to prosperity, we need to ensure that the future generation is well informed about the past. The educational curricula and programmes need to make forestry one of the areas of choice for studies.

We are told the Ga-Mashishi woodlands has a rich diversity of plants and animals - the Sekhukhune wild grape is one example. Our national tree, the yellowwood tree should be a subject of research to our learners so as to be able to preserve it, this is very important.

EduPlant is the national school permaculture and greening program motivating schools and their communities to address poverty alleviation, greening, food security, capacity building and skills development. I will encourage the local schools to participate in this programme for Ga-Mashishi's sustainable development.

In the past, huge investments of time and money were made in greening the formerly white towns and suburbs of our country. The inception of democracy has in the past ten years seen a change of face in this area. We have since been to inculcate the culture of tree planting and have produced the tree-lined streets in many other parts of our cities. We are more than happy to see that such activities have been introduced even in rural areas.

However we still have a challenge, the backlog is still a lot as not most of our township and rural areas have not enjoyed the full benefits of tree planting. Hence we are giving away free trees to schools, Community Based Organisations, private organisations and individual households.

Limpopo Province alone has over 2000 trees that were bought from the emerging nurseries that have been distributed to 24 temporary tree depots across the province. I am told that the names of the tree depots are printed on the back of the programme. These temporary tree depots will be open till the last tree is collected.

We are very happy and proud of those who have already visited the tree depots to collect their share. Indeed the positive response by our people is an indication that the people are not left behind in this during this Arbor Week campaign.

When collecting trees, people are requested to register their names for monitoring purposes. It will be fruitless for us as government to provide people with trees and not monitor these trees' well being. We want to know that they are growing and bringing benefits to our people and feel sure that you will make sure that they grow!

Great efforts have been made in ensuring that there is greater participation in all of forestry and forestry industry products by rural communities. Processes such as the restructuring of state forests have resulted in innovative partnerships between rural communities and the private sector.

These have led to rural communities having a share in the ownership and control of the forest companies. This access to commercial forestry and exposure to the realities of large-scale commercial forest management has contributed to poverty reduction through jobs, business opportunities and income.

Forestry is moving away from being a manager of state forests to developing the potential that the forestry sector has to relieve poverty. This is in line with the new vision for forestry 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".

Ladies and Gentlemen, one important issue I need to mention is the biggest threat plants and forests face today - veld and forest fires. We are now in dry season and the veld is dry. The chance of veldfire igniting, spreading and causing damage to assets and loss of human life is high.

From 1 August to 31 October 2004, it is a criminal offence to make fire in an open area for any reason. The mostly affected parts of the province are Vhembe and Mopani districts that are more vulnerable to veldfires over the past years.

Every year many lives are lost and millions of Rands worth of damages are caused to property, livestock, environment and the livelihoods, especially that of the rural poor.

Let us all work together to prevent veldfires from damaging our forests, plantations, grazing land, orchards and the housing settlements. The prevention of veld and forest fires is crucial if forestry is to continue to contribute to the creation of a better life of the citizens of this country.

Fire Prevention Associations are voluntary associations, which may be formed by landowners to prevent, predict, manage and extinguish veld fires under the National Veld Fire Act of 1998.

The Working on Fire Programme is essentially a public-private partnership aimed at promoting the integrated approach to veldfires management in South Africa.

There are two main focus areas, the pre-emptive aspect which addresses protection, hazard reduction and preparedness and then the response aspect through effective control if fires do occur.

For the first three years, 2003-2005 Working on Fire is being implemented as a pilot trial in six regions around the country - Graskop, Lydenberg and Sekororo have already set up the programme and I hope we are going to see demonstrations by 20 ladies from the Graskop group.

As government we encourage communities against cutting trees. We appeal to people to use deadwood for firewood. Let us join together during this Arbor Week and plant many trees and continue to plant throughout the year.

I would like to congratulate Ga-Mashishi Woodlands Project and further encourage that you should continue to work hard in order to maximise the benefits. In order to do this you will need to stop harvesting at some point in time to allow the woodland to grow again. When woodland plants are removed faster than they can grow, the woodland becomes degraded and people lose benefits.

To rehabilitate woodland you need to halt consumption or increase the rate of growth or do both. Rehabilitation was done here by controlling livestock, thanks to Kgoshi Mashishi and your people. The people can now harvest the re-growth of trees that were cut before.

I wish all of us an enjoyable Arbor Week and I hope we will all learn and encourage our children to plant trees. This year we are celebrating the 132<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of Arbor Week in its quest to encourage the greening of South Africa. Following the tradition of nominating two different Trees of the Year – the 2004 TREES OF THE YEAR are –

- Kirkia Acuminata - White Syringa. Modumela. Witsering
- Combretum Bracteosum - Hiccup Nut. Hikklimop. Uqotho.

I want to conclude by reminding you yet again that Trees are our heritage- Mehlare ke bojwa ba rena.

I thank you.