

Sod Turning of Berg River Water Project
Speech by Ms Buyelwa Sonjica, MP, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
28 July 2004

Ladies and gentlemen, today marks the official beginning of the construction of the Berg River Dam, and I am honoured to be here to "turn the sod". The President has emphasised that Government will develop the infrastructure we need to ensure the ongoing development of the first economy and the transformation of the lives of those still in the second economy. Today, we are making good on that promise.

This project began long before my term of office as Minister began, and I must pay tribute to the work of my predecessors, Ministers Asmal and Kasrils in driving this project forward, and in ensuring that social and environmental issues were taken into consideration.

The decision to build a dam is not taken lightly. Building a dam brings with it a number of costs, financial, environmental and social. (Current estimates are that the project will cost R1,8 billion). But it can also bring with it significant long term benefits.

In the past, agricultural and municipal water users in and around Cape Town have experienced frequent water restrictions during the dry summer months. Added to this is growing demand from the City of Cape Town. In order to respond to these pressures, Cabinet approved the building of the Berg River Water Project.

The decision to build this dam followed 14 years of study of the current and future water needs of the Western Cape, the available water resources, and an extensive review of the alternative options. It involved an intensive public consultation process, to ensure that all interests, objections and ideas were considered.

The project, which will be integrated with the Western Cape Water System, consists of both the dam and abstraction works. It is the largest water project currently being implemented in Southern Africa. The TCTA, which was established originally to ensure funding for the Lesotho Highlands Water Project, has been tasked by government with funding and implementing this project.

The process of approval of the dam has been in line with environmental legislation. The Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism issued a Record of Decision that stipulated, amongst other things, that a community-based and representative Environmental Monitoring Committee (EMC) be appointed to ensure effective environmental management of the project. The EMC has been established and has already made its presence felt. I understand that it has not all been plain sailing, and members of the EMC and the project team have grappled with the role and scope of the EMC. I have no doubt, however, that the EMC will prove to be an important contributor to the sustainability of the project.

And I must make it clear that this project does not exist in isolation. In parallel with its preparation, my Department has worked closely with the City of Cape Town to encourage promoting greater water conservation and demand management. A good start has been made but there is still a long way to go. I hope that the necessary budget commitments will continue to be made to improve water use efficiency in Cape Town.

A feather in the cap of this project is that it is the first project in South Africa that is being implemented in terms of the public participation guidelines of my Department. These follow the spirit of the guidelines of the World Commission on Dams (WCD), which remains a testament to the work done by Professor Kader Asmal in the Commission.

Indeed in 2001 a review of the Berg Water Project planning, environmental and public processes was undertaken based on the guidelines in the WCD report, "Dams and Development: A New Framework for Decision Making". The process was found to comply broadly with the best international practice as described in the guidelines.

The success of this project will depend as much on the benefit it brings to local people as to the water security, which it offers to Cape Town. So we will see the construction of 80 houses in the village of La Motte with preference going to local contractors to do the building. These will be transferred to the Stellenbosch municipality on completion of the project for occupation by local people.

The project will also bring a number of job and training opportunities to this area, through the 'Franschhoek First' employment framework. This specifies minimum employment and procurement targets for the employment of local labour and small businesses on the project. Other opportunities created by the project include a R20 million Working for Water project in the previous La Motte State Forest, more than 600 direct jobs on the main construction contract, as well as skills development and training programmes that will increase the marketability of the trainees.

An all encompassing Sustainable Utilisation Plan (SUP) will be developed by TCTA to ensure the effective utilisation and integration of infrastructure, skills, training, business development and recreational opportunities to the benefit of all members of the Franschhoek and Dwars River valley communities. The SUP will also guide the process of handing over processes and structures to the local communities.

I challenge the TCTA to develop a SUP that addresses the gender challenges in a very real way. We must provide skills, training, and business opportunities to women so that they can play their role in economic development and poverty eradication. I say this not just because I am a woman, but because there is ample evidence of the immensely positive impact that the employment and training of women has on social and family well being.

I will be following the development of the SUP with keen interest, because this will not only provide the framework for the utilisation of the structures created by the project, but also the guarantees for ongoing development on the back of the project after construction.

The funding of the Berg Water Project received a huge accolade when the international rating agency Fitch awarded it the highest credit rating for a project of this kind: AA+. TCTA deserves to be congratulated. Well done, Martie and the team! That rating was achieved on the foundation provided by the agreements between TCTA, Cape Town and my department. Those agreements will ensure the viability of the project and offer a model for similar sustainable resource development projects in our country and further afield.

The project is a mammoth task that needs to be completed in a limited time to high standards, but I have faith in the teams that have been mobilised to do the job.

As I conclude, let me remind you that we are here today at a time when the dam levels in the Western Cape are uncomfortably low and the water supply situation is precarious. You know that below average rains over the next month will lead to water use restrictions throughout the Peninsula. I call on all of you to use water wisely and well, and where possible, use less!

Let me also say that the drought has not yet lifted in many other parts of the country. While the late rains at the end of last summer season brought relief to many hard hit areas, there are still water restrictions in place in other parts of the country. My Department is monitoring dam levels closely to ensure that water restrictions are imposed timeously when and where necessary.

South Africa, as we must keep reminding ourselves, is not only a water scarce country, but a country that suffers from frequent droughts.

We must use water sparingly; we must make every drop count. And that is what the Berg river project is going to do!

Ladies and gentlemen, it is an honour for me to turn the sod for the Berg Water Project.

Thank you.