

National Arbor Week 2005: Eastern Cape
Speech by Ms BP Sonjica, MP, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
Lencane Village (Komkhulu), Idutywa, Eastern Cape
1 September 2005

Premier of the Eastern Cape, Mrs Nosimo Balindlela
MECs
Executive Mayor of Amathole District Municipality, Cllr Sakumzi Somyo
Mayor of Mbashe Local Municipality, Dr Dyantyi
Councillors present
Representatives from the House of Traditional Leaders
(uMama) Nomaka Mbeki
Officials from my and other Government Departments
Educators and Schools Governing Bodies
Community Members
Media.

As we gather here at Lencane Village to celebrate the 2005 National Arbor Week launch, I am reminded of the heroes and heroines who have emerged from this rather dry and rural part of the Eastern Cape Province. It is no coincidence that we gather here on this first day of spring, but rather a momentous occasion to pay tribute and honour some of the heroes like Tata Govan Mbeki whose roots can be traced to this very village.

The school at which we are gathered today has a special place in the history of this country and is very close to my heart. I am told that a certain principal who taught at this school politically groomed "Oom Gov". As you will witness, later in today's programme, we will plant a tree to pay tribute to Tata Govan Mbeki and uMama Mbeki who is here with us today. As the Department, we are proud that you were part of us and that we were also part of you and we wish to recognise your contribution by donating these trees, a symbol that will be remembered forever.

I am particularly inspired at the opportunity of sharing with you the launch of National Arbor Week 2005, which we are celebrating under the theme "Plant a tree, Grow our future". We have come a long way in the celebrations of this important week in the environmental calendar and perhaps I should share with you how far we come from. In South Africa, Arbor Day was first celebrated in 1983. The event captured the imagination of people who recognised the need for raising awareness of the value of trees in our society. As sources of building material, food, medicine, and simple scenic beauty, trees play a vital role in the health and well being of our communities. Collective enthusiasm for the importance of this issue in South Africa inspired the National Government, in 1999, to extend the celebration of Arbor Day to National Arbor Week. From 1 to 7 September every year, Government, schools, communities, businesses and organisations are encouraged to participate in community "greening" events to improve the health and beauty of the local environment and propose a green future for South Africa.

This year's Arbor Week is of particular importance to us as we have begun the process of establishing a Broad Based Black Economic Empowerment Charter for the Forestry Sector. I launched the process in April this year and I am glad to report that we are making good progress in achieving our deadline of end of the year. The Charter, when accepted, will guide the Forestry Sector in ensuring that we open up, grow and transform the Forestry Sector and Industry. This means we will be able to ensure that our previously disadvantaged communities especially those living near forests and plantations and those working in the sector will finally begin to benefit from the Forestry Sector. Gone will be the days that one group of people will own and benefit from our forests and the industry.

My priority and that of Government is to ensure that the benefits of forests and trees are accessible to our people, especially those who are disadvantaged because of the *apartheid* legacy. We have introduced a programme called Participatory Forest Management which aims to involve people at grass roots, our communities, women, men, the youth and the disabled in the management of our natural resources. Unless we look after our trees, forests, soil and water then our children will not be able to share in the benefits as we have done. We have encouraged local communities to get involved in the management of our forests in these areas.

In the Eastern Cape we have successfully initiated bee-keeping projects for honey production at Mt. Coke and Ndakana while also initiating medicinal plant projects at Nqabara and Ezeleni. We are working together with Provincial Government Departments using poverty relief funding to revitalise the heritage sites at King Sandile's Cave and gravesite, as well as the local hiking trails through the Sandile State Forest. At Katberg we are working hand in hand with the Nkonkobe Municipality where 25 people from the local community are employed to upgrade the Katberg Hiking Trail. These are partnerships with our people, making our forests accessible to our people, sharing the benefits of our forests and making sure that these benefits are available for the next generation.

Today I would also like talk to you about how vulnerable we are becoming to forest and veld fires. These fires pose a risk to life, properties and the environment. The Eastern Cape has been identified as one of the high-risk areas. I have appointed through my Department Fire Advisors in the Eastern Cape who are busy with information sessions with communities. We have also registered 10 Fire Protection Associations that are responsible for controlling, preventing and combating veld fires. I am proud to announce that the Eastern Cape is at the forefront of this process in the country.

Earlier, I announced the launch of the Strategic Environmental Assessment for Forestry in the Eastern Cape to members of the media. This study is the first step in the Department's programme for the development of the Forestry Sector in the Eastern Cape. The afforestation programme has the potential to contribute significantly to the economy of the Province, as well as to the livelihoods of the poorest of the poor. Forestry has in the past been frowned upon as a development opportunity for rural people as people were not able to own forests and benefit from them in a meaningful way. Yet today Government is able to say that forests are for people and that it is the role of Government at all levels to create an enabling environment for people to benefit from forests and plantations especially at the local level. In fact this is the new vision of my Department for forestry.

The initiative that has been taken by Government in the commissioning of this Strategic Environmental Assessment is one such example of how Government is able to create an enabling environment for development at local level. It must also be emphasised that this study is a collaborative effort by Government at all levels. The project was designed and commissioned by a steering committee comprising representatives from the Premier's Office; the National Department of Land Affairs; and the Provincial Departments of Agriculture; Economic Affairs, Environment and Tourism; and Local Government and Housing. Not least of all, my own Department, which has played a facilitatory role throughout. Local Government has been actively engaged and the products of the study will help Local and District Municipalities to develop their Integrated Development Plans and Spatial Development Frameworks. This is an example of the spheres of Government working together.

Forestry is not new in the Eastern Cape. The Province has 170 000 hectares of plantations and the largest area of indigenous forests in the country – over 100 000 hectares. The plantations alone employ an estimated 8 700 people and generate R300 million per annum from the sale of trees and processed timber. However, what is significant and the focus of our attention today is the development and growth of the Forest Sector.

The potential of the Eastern Cape as a region for forestry expansion has been recognised, but never properly investigated and quantified. This is now being done through the Strategic Environmental Assessment, which is a participative process of examining the environmental, economic and social opportunities and constraints for forestry development. At the end of the day we, as Government, are custodians of our country's natural resources, our rich and diverse heritage. We must ensure that development not only meets short-term objectives such as job creation, but that it is environmentally and economically sustainable.

Development must make our children's children richer in terms of their total quality of life. This is what the Strategic Environmental Assessment seeks to do. To assess the costs, benefits, the opportunities and constraints, so that at the end of the process Government can confidently say - "This is where forestry can be sustainably developed and how much should be developed so as not to make us "poorer" in terms of access to water, biodiversity and access to land for other agricultural purposes such as maize growing, food security and livestock farming.

The Strategic Environmental Assessment will also enable Government to say - "This is how it needs to be done": People must be consulted; Local and District Municipalities must endorse forestry development in their integrated planning so that roads and infrastructure can be built to service the plantations; there must be ownership and equity for all members of the community; there must be skills development in communities; there must be proper institutional arrangements and business processes; there must be empowerment. You will begin to understand from what I am saying that forestry is not just planting trees and cutting them down, but that it is a major industry that will lead to secondary processing and manufacture, to export and the earning of foreign exchange. Forests will link rural people with the global economy and provide a way for wealth to flow from the rich to the poor.

At this point of the study we are proud to release the Focus Area Report, which looks in detail at the potential of the Pondoland region for future development. The study confirms and endorses the potential for up to 60 000 hectares of new plantations. The development of this potential will not compromise the biodiversity of the Pondoland region and makes a strong recommendation that no development takes place in the Pondoland Centre of Endemism and areas suitable for tourism along the coast. This level of development would also not compromise food security or other agricultural development opportunities in the Pondoland region.

It must be emphasised that while Government determines the “rules of the game” - where and how forestry should develop, the industry as well as local communities must be brought together in order to make forestry happen. My Department is positioning itself to play a leading role in this regard in the near future as a facilitator between the private sector, the markets and the communities who wish to grow the trees.

As I have said this is a first step in the journey towards a better future for people. It is a journey that we as Government are committed to. There are still lots of work in the months and years ahead. For this we need to forge and maintain strong relationships between all role-players: the Forest Industry, Government and most importantly the people of the Eastern Cape. To the media here today, I would like to thank you as you have a very important role to play in terms of helping Government to educate and inform people about what forestry has to offer.

In closing it has been my pleasure to announce the launch of the Strategic Environmental Assessment and that we are making progress. From this point on the focus of the study will be expanded from Pondoland to the wider forestry region of the Eastern Cape as far south as the Keiskamma River and north to Mzimkhulu. We all look forward with anticipation to the final report at the end of this year and the roll-out of the forestry development programme.

I thank you.