

The Role of Water in Meeting the Challenges of the Free State
Free State Water Summit
Speech by Ms BP Sonjica, MP, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
Bloemfontein
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Chairperson
Premier
Mayors and Councillors
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen
Departmental Officials

In this the 50th anniversary year of the Freedom Charter, I greet you by reminding you of our commitment to our people, that there shall be houses, security and comfort!

While the first priority of our people is to have safe and reliable water supply and sanitation services – the better life that the Freedom Charter committed us to fight for – I must remind you that without water, there would be no economy, no services of any kind, indeed, no life.

So while the immediate priority of our people is to get access to those services that I mention – and I will come back to these - I want to start by talking about that very essence of life, the water resources on which we all depend.

When I looked through your Provincial Growth and Development Strategy, I got the same message. You quote the National Spatial Development Framework which “advocates a focus on areas with development potential” and note that development potential is based on criteria which include “Natural resource potential: agricultural potential, environmental sensitivity **and the availability of water.**”

So I believe it is entirely appropriate for us to come together here today to consider how water can contribute to your economic and social development programmes – and where it may be a serious constraint.

This must be seen and understood as part of our efforts to make cooperative government work. We must be guided by a common vision if we are to work together to achieve our common goals.

We have come together to discuss both water resource management and water services, that is water supply and sanitation and in the presentations and discussions that follow, you will interrogate these in detail.

So let me simply highlight a few critical issues on which we should concentrate.

I must start by reminding you all that South Africa is a dry country. Because we manage water well, we sometimes forget that we are on the edge of what is internationally defined as water scarcity in terms of how little water we have available per person.

Because we are so short of water, we must ensure that we get as much benefit from its use as possible.

That means we have to be careful and efficient in the way we use it and we need to be clever too – internationally they talk about how to get “more crop per drop”. We must think about how to get “more jobs per drop”, more “more product per drop”

We also need to protect our water because once it is polluted, there is nowhere else we can go to find other supplies.

The Provincial Growth and Development Strategy (GDS) say that, to give effect to your developmental objectives, the areas that need to be addressed by 2014 include

- To achieve an annual economic growth rate at least equal to the national average
- To reduce unemployment from 38,9% to 20%.

- To reduce the number of households living in poverty by 5% per annum.
- To reduce infant mortality for children under five years to 65 per 1000 live births.
- To provide shelter for all the people of the province.
- To provide free basic services to all households.
- To provide adequate infrastructure for economic growth and development.

I know we are talking the same language because water and water services will play a vital role in achieving all these objectives.

Our National Water Resource Strategy was developed precisely to address these challenges and during the presentations and discussions, I hope you will consider how its specific programmes support your priorities because we want to ensure that the way we manage our water supports the achievement of the goals that we have set ourselves as a nation.

As an example, your GDS focuses extensively on agriculture, as it should in a province like the Free State where you have ample fertile land and opportunities for far more intensive production.

Although the Free State is embraced by two of the country's largest rivers, the Orange and the Vaal River, those rivers also serve five other provinces, which together comprise the economic heartland of the country. And the availability of water is limited and even scarce towards the central and western parts of the Province.

So while the Vaal Water Management Areas will likely run into deficits before the year 2025 even with the Lesotho transfers, the Renoster and Vals Rivers are already demonstrating chronic water shortages. This will impact negatively on the main users of water in this catchment, namely farmers who use the water for irrigation.

So your commitment to seek to diversify agricultural production and to introduce high value crops is exactly in line with our recommendation of getting more "crop per drop".

But there is still scope for expansion elsewhere in the province and, in the National Water Resource Strategy, we have identified and reserved water from the Orange River for up to 13 000 hectares of new irrigation for the settlement of emerging farmers, 3 000 hectares of which is in the Free State. I hope that during this summit, we will discuss how we can make practical progress on using this water to achieve your goals of

- Facilitating completion of land restitution programme as well as buying land to establish PDI farmers;
- Supporting small scale farmers as well as the beneficiaries of land redistribution and restitution programme; and
- Helping farmers through the Comprehensive Agriculture Support Programme and providing non formal training to farmers in Agriculture Management

We are anxious to ensure that the Government water schemes, which we are in the process of converting to Water User Associations, could contribute to your programme. And indeed, we believe that the Water User Associations may be able to provide effective structures through which partnerships between commercial and emerging farmers can be established, as has happened elsewhere in the country. We know that successful and efficient farming is a challenging business and we must get all the help we can to ensure that our new farmers are successful.

There are also other economic opportunities that you need to consider, expanding the role of dams as tourism centres; using the surplus water infrastructure from the mining industry to promote new activities; those are just a few examples.

Turning to water services, I need to highlight the successes that have been achieved by government, nationally and in Free State particularly.

At a national level we can proudly say that significant progress has already been achieved during the first 10 years of our democracy. Nationally, DWAF has served 10,5 million people with the basic level of water supply and government as a whole – through housing and municipal programmes more than 15 million people. Although not all have supplies to the RDP standard, within 200 metres from the home, only 3,6

million or 8% of our population are still without any access to safe water and we are still committed to ending that backlog by 2008.

The record with sanitation is less impressive but 8,5 million people have been served with basic sanitation, largely through housing and municipal infrastructure programmes. Sanitation remains a major challenge with 16 million people in our country not enjoying access to a safe, healthy and convenient sanitation facility.

The Free State has shared in our achievements and challenges. You have halved your basic water supply backlog from 15% of the provincial population in 1994 to less than 8% of the current population, or just under 230 000 people not enjoying the basic standard of water supply. The Province also accounts for represents 6,5% of the national backlog on sanitation. A particular problem here is the bucket system, accounting for 41% of total number of buckets in the country.

In your GDS, you state that your goals are to

- Provide Housing
- Provide sanitation
- Eradicate bucket system where there is access to water and infrastructure
- Provide water

Once again, your goals are clearly our goals and I can commit my Department to working closely with the Province and municipalities to achieve them.

Of course, providing infrastructure is only the start of providing water supply and sanitation. Good management of operations is critical if we are to avoid dry taps, blocked toilets and polluted rivers.

In this regard I must commend the province for your initiatives in ensuring that drinking water quality is monitored and maintained. The Free State is the first Province to initiate a structured programme in this regard and lessons learnt here will be shared with other Provinces. It was therefore particularly unfair that you should have been criticised by the media as a problem province simply because you had systematically identified the problem areas and intervened to improve them. Keep up the good work! We will defend your record.

With respect to the challenge of sanitation, you will know that, in cooperation with DPLG and National Treasury, we have made R1.2 billion available over the next three years to eliminate the buckets once and for all. I trust that you are working hard to ensure that you take this opportunity once and for all to eliminate this stinking legacy of the past.

But you must be aware of the challenges facing some municipalities in the Province where our water quality data indicates that your sewage treatment works are not being managed as well as they should be and that some have even discharged raw sewage into our precious rivers. It is the responsibility of each municipality to ensure that planning, budgeting and management of such sanitation infrastructure is done properly and I hope you will take the opportunity provided by the bucket eradication programme to improve your performance.

Where the bucket systems are located within dense urban areas and you are planning to upgrade to full waterborne sanitation, please remember that it takes water to flush toilets. Make sure that existing water supply and sewage treatment infrastructure can accommodate this or make plans to expand it. You must also make sure that your projects are financially viable and that you have the necessary skills and resources to operate and maintain the services.

For this programme and to improve water services generally, my Department will provide hands-on support to municipalities to improve their Water Services Development Plans, implement demand and conservation measures, use their Municipal Infrastructure Grants effectively and institute proper monitoring programmes.

This is part of our contribution to Project Consolidate and I am pleased with the progress that my Department's Regional Office here in Bloemfontein, in partnership with the province's Department of Local Government, has made in this regard.

Finally, to alleviate poverty and to ensure equitable access to water services by all people, we have to ensure that the Free Basic Water and Free Basic Sanitation Policies are effectively applied in all

municipalities. This can be done if we understand that it goes hand-in-hand with proper financial management and functional cost recovery to ensure financial viability of the services that municipalities provide.

In closing, I wish to state that water has played a prominent role to establish the principles of equality, dignity and equity, the right to safe and healthy living, the right to food and jobs and an unqualified opportunity to develop our human and economic assets.

As the Premier has highlighted, as is made clear in your Growth and Development Strategy, the Free State has already set important milestones for the achievement of these goals. These include key water issues, which clearly demonstrates the common goals and principles that we share with you. Let us join forces, minds and ambitions and work together to achieve a better life for all our people in an effective and sustainable way.

While our women are not free from the burden of carrying water, while children are not free from the burden of disease caused by unsanitary conditions, while our people are not free of poverty caused by joblessness, of the misery of homelessness, none of us is free and we cannot say that our struggle is over. In the words of the Freedom Charter,

“These freedoms we will fight for, side by side, throughout our lives, until we have won our liberty.”

I thank you all.