

**Water Week Celebrations and the launching of the Nzhelele Water User Association**  
**Speech by Ms Buyelwa Sonjica, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry**  
**Rabali Agricultural Showground, Machado**  
**24 March 2005**

Master of Ceremony; Honourable guests.

Ndi matsheloni, avuxeni, thobela, Good morning, Goeie môre.

As we celebrate National Water Week, I am pleased to announce publicly the establishment of the Nzhelele Water User Association. This establishment marks a history in the management of our water resources. I invite you ladies and gentlemen, to celebrate with us the joy of our achievement.

This year's Water Week theme – "Water for Life" is very appropriate as we launch your Water User Association. This is because every creature depends on water for survival. In this part of the country, we mainly depend on fresh water. At this stage one should think of rivers, lakes, wetlands and fountains, which are the main sources of our water. Our water resources do not only supply water, but they provide habitats for a variety of animals and plants. These ecosystems provide important services to us such as purifying water, moderating floods and droughts and sustaining fisheries.

All over the world, water problems have become worse, especially around issues of food production, human health, poverty alleviation, the protection of ecosystems, regional peace and stability. South Africa is not immune from these problems, but we find ourselves as part of these global concern. For example we know that South Africa is a dry country, and it is a fact that we experience drought from time to time. Similarly, our recent investigations indicate that the Nzhelele River basin is one of the stressed catchments in the Limpopo Water Management Area. If we want to expand developments in this area, it is necessary that options to secure more water be proposed.

Within the context of these global problems, we have a history that has created a challenging environment in water resources. Due to past laws, the management of our water was fragmented, a factor that denied the majority of our communities, access to this precious resource. After achieving our democracy ten years ago, most of these laws have been changed and we can now talk about equal access to water by all. We have positioned ourselves in the world map and can equally deal with the global challenges identified above at both local and national scales.

It is true that the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry develops policies for managing water, but what is important is the service that we deliver to our people. I would like to make reference to a programme in which we as government are ensuring that water users become managers of the water resources. This is the programme through which, we are establishing water management institutions Catchment Management Agencies and Water User Associations to which we delegate functions. Our aim is that the establishment of these institutions should create a forum for stakeholders and communities to deliberate on water resources issues and take the necessary decisions.

The role of government at all spheres is important in water resources management and we would like to involve them in the establishment and functioning of these institutions. In the process, we will, therefore, promote co-operative government with key departments. That is why you see a number of government departments present here today. We have the Department of Local Government, which has a programme on Local Economic Development. Without water they can not ensure its effective implementation. We are aware that due to lack of consistent supply of water for primary use, rural communities upstream of the Nzhelele Dam have resorted in putting up pipes to springs, which are up the mountains to transport water to their houses. This is despite having government water schemes, which have house connections. This is one area where the Vhembe District municipality will play a major role.

In the same breath, the Limpopo Provincial Department of Agriculture, which is ensuring that we have our food, needs water to assist farmers in their business. They have a programme to revive the irrigation schemes for the benefit of our communities. My Department will work with them in the maintenance and improvement of the 13 irrigation schemes in the Nzhelele Catchment. Mobilising and directing the necessary financial and human resources to these schemes will accomplish this.

I do not forget our traditional leadership, which is at the forefront in the management of natural resources. Traditional leaders are re-known for the institution and implementation of customary laws for sustainable management of the water resources. For this reason, we would like to work with the traditional leaders on few projects. These involve deciding on the future land use of the land around catchment A80A, which is under land claim. We would like to encourage the conservation of such land to ensure the protection of the Mutshedzi River Catchment. Our working relationship will further involve control of illegal water use and the role of chiefs in the allocation of agricultural land. An indispensable link between land allocation on the one

hand and water allocation on the other hand, provides an opportunity to foster this relationship. On this basis, traditional leaders should be included in the structures of water management institutions.

While we have several water uses in the Nzhelele Catchment our first concern is water for domestic use without which, our communities will not meet their basic daily needs. The Vhembe District Municipality as a Water Services Authority is ensuring equal access to by all to this basic resource. My Department will continue to work with them and all the local municipalities of Makhado, Musina, Thulamela, and Mutale in this regard.

Today we meet here because some of you are farmers, and as such you need water for agriculture. It is indeed our aim to make sure that the allocation of water caters for the needs of farmers to ensure that they continue to feed our nation. We are saying food security is important for everyone and for the rural poor. In order to assist the resource poor farmers, we have developed an "Operational Policy on Assistance to Resource Poor Farmers". This policy enables us to provide financial support in the form of grant and subsidies. If you are organised into a Water User Association, you stand a better chance to qualify since the Association will efficiently be able to manage the water resources. Above all, issues of equity in access to water and redressing the results of past imbalances as well the financial position of the recipient will be considered in providing this support.

On the other hand, the Nzhelele Catchment also caters for other uses such as recreation, environment and forestry including brick making and industries, which are also important. With all these competing uses, water users should respect each other's needs so that they all will have equal access to this scarce resource.

Having spoken about different water uses, it reminds me of an important aspect. This is the value of water in the economy. Though everybody sees water as a God given thing, water has got a price attached to it. For example we need the infrastructure to distribute water, we need dams to store water, we need managers to look after our water and where it is polluted, water must be cleaned.

All these need some money to accomplish. Sometimes we need to buy water from our neighbouring countries or start a joint project so that we can make water available to our nation. We have hence attached a price to the water that everyone uses. In all instances my Department has considered promoting access to water by subsidising them in their uses. Hence we have subsidy schemes to promote access to water by the historically marginalised group. We also have a guarantee for free basic water. These arrangements have been put in place in order to remove burden from the poor.

If I am to make reference to water user associations, the Nzhelele Water User Association is the 19th that I have established since I took office with the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry. However, this Association is the first of its kind in South Africa. You will realise that our objective as government was to establish a Water User Association upstream of the Nzhelele Dam in order to cater for the needs of the resource poor. As it is today we have a merger of the upstream and downstream water users.

Downstream users are white commercial farmers, while upstream users are black emerging farmers. I would like to congratulate the farmers who approached my Department in order to encourage their merger. They have buried the past, become one and united by water. This positive spirit is what we would like to see in the process of transforming governance over the water resources. In most countries water has become a source of conflict, but here we see it as a uniting factor. South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white.

The amalgamation of the two categories of users has got implications. Among others, it means that the two will plan together on how to manage water. They will also speak in one voice when they come to us. Further, I hope there is going to be a transfer of skills from the experienced to the less experienced. I have looked at the management structure and found that there are number of women who are represented. I have also heard that there are four sub-areas of the Water User Associations that are all represented in this management structure. A number of sectors including our traditional leaders and the municipality are also represented.

The Nzhelele Water User Association has been established in the broader catchment in order to exercise water management functions. While this geographical scale will help in promoting the broader objectives of water resources management, it will also promote the sustainability of the Association. However, if there is a need to pursue other activities such as promoting the marketing of agricultural products, farmers can still form co-operatives for such purposes. I will repeatedly announce that my Department will support all water users regardless of the purpose for which they use water.

Though your Association is delegated with certain responsibilities, my Department is still accountable. That is why, before delegating the functions, my Department will commission the process of validation and

verification of existing lawful water use as soon as possible. Parallel to this will be the determination of water allocations for the resource poor farmers in the previously neglected schemes.

I would like to say to the committee that your communities trust you. That is why they have elected you. Please perform your duties with diligence. My Department will support you. They will, therefore, assist you in building capacity to ensure your effectiveness in water management activities.

At the end, we would like you to take charge of the management of the water and we will only monitor your activities. To all water users, know that, from today the Water User Association you have established will be your police dog, your mouthpiece and support.

I thank you.