

New Board of the Water Research Commission
Speech by Ms BP Sonjica, MP, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
Pretoria
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Programme Director
Chairperson of the WRC Board, Ms Khoza
The rest of the Board Members
CEO, Ms Rivka.

It is indeed a pleasure for me to welcome the new Board of the Water Research Commission (WRC) today at this occasion. I would like to thank you for agreeing to serve on the board. This shows commitment to both contribute to the development and improvement of the sector and to taking our government forward.

I am not going to make a long lesson about the mandate of the WRC at this meeting as I assume that before you took up and agreed to be the member of the WRC board, each of us sited here understood what our job as a member of the board of the Commission entails.

What is critical for me, and I think for all of us, is that there are many challenges faced by the Water Sector in general. The WRC is one of the institutions that are central in responding and/or giving guidance on how as a country we would respond to such challenges. Yours is to put your ear on the ground, listen to practical problems / challenges as articulated by the all affected – communities' need of water and related resources, farmers' water needs, the skill shortages experienced by the country in terms of relevant skills to address water shortage in the country.

A few challenges that so far we are all aware of include the following –

Research tells us that South Africa is one of the water stressed countries of the world. The Water Research Commission should support efforts to manage that scarcity by research that:

- improves our understanding of scarce water resources, including the impact of climate change on water resources
- helps to develop the instruments that we are using to manage water such as –
 - the reserve for basic needs and the environment,
 - compulsory allocation processes,
 - waste water management options, both technical and institutional

As a country and also mandated by the Constitution and the National Water Act, we are also addressing historic inequalities that are not in sink with our Bill of Right. The WRC's work should contribute to redressing that inequity through:

- supporting activities that engage historically marginalised communities in water management and use,
- identifying and supporting water-based opportunities in farming and other areas,
- supporting the provision of basic services through research on and support to service provision organisations as well as on technical issues,
- work on the cultural, organisational and technical challenges to providing safe sanitation for all South Africans, which should be a particular focus.

As you may be aware, there has been a raging debate within Cabinet / government forums about the capacity of government to execute its mandate – of service delivery and providing a better life for all. In a nutshell this has been calling for and questioning the human resource capacity of the country.

This question has been posed to our various portfolios to respond to. The cooperation and partnership of government makes this a concern of everybody including the institutions like the WRC as well as the general public.

Although the formal products of the WRC are its research, it can be argued that the most important products are the people who do the research. The area of the WRC and the related bodies becomes even critical as it the area of “special skills” yet most needed for basic services – water supply and sanitation, basic requirement for providing better life for all.

The WRC has a huge responsibility of being part of producing human capacity that is needed by join water management organisations such as DWAF, the Water Boards, municipalities and industry.

By attracting graduates in related fields and providing universities with the resources to fund postgraduate research, the WRC contributes to building the pool of professionally qualified people available to the water sector. This is a critical output in this phase.

This means that continued attention should be paid to funding activities, which have clear training and educational components; research by consultants should be limited to areas where there is a specific need for the research product.

The WRC must also ensure that historically disadvantaged communities are well represented in its cadres of young researchers.

The Board (although it is formally called the Commission) is appointed by the Minister to guide the organisation to achieve the strategic objectives outlined.

It must also ensure that the governance of the organisation meets the high standards demanded of public organisations by laws such as the PFMA.

The board is not expected to manage the detailed operations of the organisation that is the job of the CEO. But it should maintain itself sufficiently informed to ensure that there are no unpleasant surprises.

Where there is misconduct, action must be taken. A good example was the way that the CEO handled the failure of the former CFO to abide by policy on the management of WRC funds. The Commissioners and the Minister were informed about the problem and then kept informed about the actions that were being taken until the issue was resolved.

In this regard, the Minister's door is always open and you also have a channel through the Director General who is on the Board as an ex-officio member (until we amend the law because policy of government is that the DGs should not normally serve on the Boards of institutions that their Departments oversee).

That highlights a final point. The Water Research Act is very old and does not adequately reflect either current objectives or institutional arrangements and policy. As part of the restructuring and transformation of the water sector, the Act needs to be amended and that will be another area in which the Board can contribute.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the Board and reiterate my appreciation and that of government that people are ever willing to be partners in ensuring that our government delivers in its mandate.

I wish the Board the best of luck in your work to strengthen the water sector with your expertise and I trust we can always call on you to assist us execute our mandate effectively.

I thank you.