

**WeedBuster Week 2005**  
**Speech by Ms BP Sonjica, MP, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry**  
**Nkomazi, Kamhlushwa Stadium**  
**14 October 2005**

Sanibonani, Ndaa, Good Morning, Goeie Môre

It is heartening to note that 11 years into our fledgling democracy, we are gathered here to celebrate our efforts in protecting our environment, an often silent partner in our efforts to restore the dignity of this country and its people.

We frequently tend to overlook our dependence on our natural resources, which is by far the most valuable inheritance that we can leave for future generations. How often do we gather to contemplate how we are repaying the favours that our natural environment bestows on us?

With the widespread prevalence of poverty we should remember that the natural environment is a powerful ally in our attempts to cross this hurdle. As a government we recognise this, and this occasion presents us with an opportunity for us to reiterate our commitment to this effort.

The *Working for Water* programme has been an inspiration to our young democracy. It is steeped in the principles of people-centred reconstruction and development that have been the hallmark of South Africa's democratic government since April 1994. It has sought developmental advantages for our country and people, supplementing its core work in controlling invasive alien plants with a labour-intensive emphasis that focuses on the most marginalised in society. It is with this in mind that we have come together in Nkomazi to celebrate 10 years of the *Working for Water* Programmes success.

The theme for WeedBuster Week, which takes place from the 10 - 16 October is **Stop the Invasion. Plant Indigenous**. WeedBuster Week represents the annual culmination and highlight of the ongoing campaign aimed at the management and containment of invasive alien plants. The campaign is a multi-departmental initiative led by the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry through the *Working for Water* (WfW) programme, and supported by various partners and stakeholders. The South African campaign is linked bi-laterally to invasive plant control initiatives by countries such as Australia and New Zealand, and multi-laterally to the broader Global Invasive Species Programme (GISP) and other structures and frameworks.

Nkomazi has been identified as a Poverty node and *Working for Water* has nine teams comprising 185 workers, which hail from this area. This is an indication that *Working for Water* has reached out to the most economically depressed areas of our country, to the rural poor and to those left destitute through the policies of apartheid. It has also recognised that there is great poverty in many of our urban areas, and ensured that it also makes its contribution in such areas.

The *Working for Water* programme, which is aimed at the management and containment of Invasive Alien Plants, was started in 1995 through a grant of R25 million from the then Reconstruction and Development programme. My predecessor, Professor Kader Asmal was the inspiration behind the programme. Former President Nelson Mandela is the Patron in Chief of the programme.

Of the 20 000 people employed annually in the programme, 52% are female, 19% youth and 1% disabled. During 2004/5, 142,417 initial and 507,139 hectares follow-up clearing were completed.

As the programme grew, so did its social focus broaden. It has sought to benefit the poorest of the poor, and this led to a particular focus on single-parent households. It has provided work opportunities to those living with HIV/AIDS, restoring their dignity and respect. It has also endeavoured to provide opportunities to those victims of crime, those living in areas of violence and intolerance, and those fostering orphans".

All of this has been done without compromising its focus on controlling invasive alien plants. The programme has provided training and work opportunities to tens of thousands of South Africans who had previously been denied the dignity and hope that employment brings. It has sought to work with partner departments in being a sensitive provider of training and work opportunities, with many social interventions.

Invasive Alien plants (IAPs) have invaded over 10 million hectares of South Africa and because they multiply so fast, if left unchecked, the problem could double in the next 15 years. In order to protect our natural resources I call on you, the community to be more aware of and take responsibility for removing IAPs.

What cannot be disputed is that invasive alien vegetation represents a real challenge to us in protecting our natural heritage. Enough evidence exist, as was highlighted at a recent symposium where the country's top experts gathered to share the scientific arguments for invasive alien plant clearing in South Africa, that shows us that if we do not deal with the scourge of invasives now, the price we will have to pay in the future will be devastating to our country's development ideals.

Estimates indicate that 7% of our annual water runoff is being guzzled up by invasive alien plants, and what is especially alarming is that this figure will get progressively worse. The negative impacts also do not stop there - others include

- the degradation of our rich biological diversity which underpins our tourism industry,
- the ecological integrity of our natural systems on which we all depend for our livelihoods,
- fire management and the havoc that alien-invasive fuelled wildfires wreak on us from time to time,
- the productive use of land responsible for keeping the country's food basket stocked, and
- ultimately the conservation of our life-support systems.

However, to deal with this problem effectively we need the right tools in our armoury. Any concerted attempt has to be underpinned by sound legislation and I am happy to report that we are making important strides in ensuring that the various disparate pieces of legislation which we can utilise in enforcing our commitment, are being pulled together to ensure that in future we can have a "one-stop shop" in dealing with the invasive threat.

Prevention is obviously better than cure, and considerable improvements also has to be made to ensure that new invasives do not enter our shores unnoticed. The need for constant improvement in our understanding of how these invasives spread as they do, and how we deal with them, also cannot be stressed enough.

By far the most powerful tool in our armoury to deal with the problem revolve around educational and awareness initiatives. Annual events such as WeedBuster Week, present us with an opportunity to unite as custodians of our natural heritage and raise our awareness to exercise this custodianship responsibly.

It is not enough for us to only be able to identify invasive alien vegetation, but also empower ourselves to identify those indigenous plants which they replace. What we do in our gardens is perhaps the best barometer to judge this awareness and I challenge each and every citizen to start the battle in their backyards, by identifying and removing invasives and promote the planting of indigenous species to protect our natural heritage.

The importance then to extend these efforts to our community parks and gardens and initiating volunteer hacking groups, would be the natural next step, and this progression in organisation will eventually lead to a reduced effort in the long run to deal with the problem.

Some of you may also be engaged in importing seemingly harmless plants and animals to our shores – my message to you is to ensure that you consult our country's experts first to determine the risk which these species pose, before doing so.

Today, is almost exactly 10 years to the day that my predecessor, Professor Asmal, launched the Working for Water Programme as a concerted effort by government to deal with the problem of invasives. If anything the last 10 years have shown us that we cannot relax this effort, and I trust you will carry this message on to your families, friends and colleagues to join together to protect our natural resources. Without this collective effort, we cannot win the battle.

I thank you, siyabonga.