

**Drinking Water Quality Debate**  
**Speech by Mrs Lindiwe Hendricks, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry**  
**National Assembly, Parliament, Cape Town**  
**19 October 2006**

Madam Speaker  
Members of Parliament

The issue of Drinking Water Quality is critical to the well-being of all South African's and is therefore an important area of focus for my Department. While South Africa is doing very well in maintaining a very high standard of water quality, it is important that we are open about the challenges that exist in this area and I would like to thank the Portfolio Committee for hosting the hearings and producing the report that is the subject of today's debate. We as a department have noted the contents of the report and the recommendations made by the portfolio committee.

The question is: Is South Africa's drinking water safe? We have a high level of confidence in the quality and safety of drinking water provided to people living in the metropolitan and greater urban areas. I am confident enough in the water quality to drink tap water, and even the bottled water I drink is tap water supplied by Rand Water. In rural areas and smaller municipalities steps are being taken to ensure the quality of tap water will also meet the strictest of standards.

Members of the house will be aware that Local Government has the responsibility through their Water Service Providers to manage the quality of water, with the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry (DWAF) as the regulator and sector leader ensuring that this is done effectively, with the Minister having powers to intervene where the quality of water is not up to required standards.

My Department, DWAF, partnered with the Free State Provincial Government and local authorities to pilot an electronic system to monitor the quality of water; and the success of this joint effort has resulted in 95 – 98% of the authorities in the Free State collecting the data and complying with quality requirements; these figures includes rural areas, which honourable members highlights what can be achieved in both urban and rural areas. This system is now being rolled out to the rest of the country so that in a short period all Water Services Authorities will have an electronic Drinking Water Quality Management System. The system requires these authorities to capture water quality information on a regular basis and a monthly report is produced for both the Municipality and DWAF. This system is a tool for my department to play an oversight role but more importantly it is capacitating local government and water service authorities to be effective in ensuring the supply of safe drinking water. This system will complement the ongoing water quality monitoring activities that Water Service Authorities have been engaged in; already 85% of the Water Services Authorities have been monitoring water quality this year, which is up from 58% in 2005.

To ensure we maintain our high quality of water we require co-operative governance and I urge Local Government to support the roll-out of this system so that we can ensure that the quality of drinking water meets stringent standards and where problems are identified interventions can be made. The successful turn-around of a small Municipality such as Kai !Garib (Kakamas) in the Northern Cape not only encourages me: it also restores my faith in the capacity and proficiency that exists in the sector.

As part of our programme to ensure water quality we have commissioned studies through the Water Research Commission (WRC) to assess potable water quality, water distribution systems and disinfection, the result of which will further inform my department's future actions. A study has also been undertaken to identify capacity needs in Local Authorities, and the recommendations will inform our support measures to Local Government. The Water Information Network, which is a collaborative sector initiative are facilitating knowledge dissemination of good practice so as to strengthen the knowledge base in the water sector. These efforts contribute towards meeting the objective of ensuring the safety of drinking water by improving the skills levels of those responsible for treating and reticulating drinking water. I am encouraged by the initiatives of the Department of Provincial and Local Government and institutions such as the WRC, Water Institute for Southern Africa (WISA) and the Institute for Municipal Engineers of South Africa (IMESA) that have collaborated with us to ensure that technical capacity at local government level is increased

It has become clear that isolated problems over drinking water quality have been used by companies marketing products as home water purification systems or bottled water. By doing this, South African tap water has been unjustly seen to be of poor quality, which has created confusion amongst the poor who might feel it necessary to buy such products.

As part of our efforts to overcome these misconceptions we are implementing a monitoring programme including in schools. Yesterday as part of World Water Monitoring Day my department ran a programme in 40 schools whereby learners were given water quality test kits, trained in how to use them and conduct tests on water quality in their own local environment. These learners have been asked to give feedback to their local municipality and DWAF on their findings. Next year we look forward to greater numbers of schools participating in this exciting initiative. Not only will they be supplying us with information but also this initiative will encourage these learners to study water issues at a tertiary level.

Honourable Members where Water Services Authorities fail to comply with supplying safe drinking water DWAF will be able to quickly identify the problems and support them to improve the situation. Last year the problems of drinking water quality at Delmas were severe to the point where lives were lost as a result of a typhoid outbreak. My department, along with the relevant provincial government departments, has been working with the local authority to turn around the situation.

Madam Speaker, honourable members we are commitment to provision of quality drinking water in our country.

I thank you.  
End.