

Water Week Celebrations, Western Cape
Speech by Ms BP Sonjica, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
Piesang Valley Community Hall, Plettenberg Bay
27 March 2006

Master of Ceremonies, Honourable Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Good morning.

As we celebrate National Water Week we need to focus on using water wisely and the need to save water. This year's Water Week theme – ***Water for Growth and Development*** – reminds us of the importance of water and that water is vital for growth and development. We need water for all aspects of life – from cooking to washing, to farming, to industry. That also means that each and every one of us has a responsibility to make sure our water resources are protected in order to ensure that there is sufficient for future generations to come.

Sustainability and equity are central guiding principles in the protection, use, development, conservation, management and control of water resources. These guiding principles recognize amongst other the basic human needs of present and future generations, the need to protect water resources, the need to promote social and economic development through the use of water.

The key is to find the optimum balance where water can be used for economic and social development and on the other hand to protect our water resources. This is especially relevant to this area with its beautiful natural water resources scenery and, on the other hand, the rapid economic development that is occurring. Continuous sustainable development will bring much-needed jobs, which in turn will reduce poverty and improves the lives of people.

The challenge is to internalize the message that water in our country is a scarce commodity and that each of us has to play a roll in the conservation and demand management of water. If we all start at our own area of influence I am sure that it will make a significant contribution to make water available for further development and in some instances to contribute to the water requirements of the aquatic ecology. Water requirements for the aquatic ecology is called the "*ecological reserve*" in terms of the National Water Act, 1998 (Act 36 of 1998). If additional water resources have to be developed you can be assured that the requirements of the basic human needs reserve and the ecological reserve will not be compromised.

Pollution is a major threat to the sustainability of our water resources. In this regard pollution from densely populated and poorly serviced settlements is perhaps one of South Africa's most important, but most complex water quality problems. Important, because pollution in and from these settlements not only affects downstream users, but has its most significant impacts on the communities living in these settlements.

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.

Failing sanitation and waste removal systems create appalling living conditions in many settlements, and contribute to serious health problems in these communities. Pollution in and from these settlements is, therefore, not only a water quality issue, but has much wider

implications for Government's aims to provide a better life for all. Complex, because pollution in settlements is rooted in the socio-economic, political and institutional conditions in the settlement. The use, or misuse, of services together with the way in which the services are maintained by Local Authorities lies at the heart of the pollution problem in many settlements.

Solutions, therefore, lie in changing the way in which the services are supplied and used. However, sustainable solutions to the problem lie not only in our ability to supply and use waste and sanitation services to best effect, but also in the longer-term capacity of local government to maintain these services. This is likely to be the biggest stumbling block to sustainable management of pollution from settlements.

Local Government in South Africa clearly has significant capacity problems and misuse of services, for a variety of reasons, is endemic in many settlements across the country. More importantly, failing waste services contribute to poor living conditions and hence to the misuse of the services. Non-payment for services also limits the capacity of the Local Authority to effectively maintain the services, which then leads to further failure of the services.

Strategies to manage pollution in settlements must take a broader view of both Local Authority capacity, and the socio-economic and political dynamics of the community in order to arrest this downward spiral.

The power outages that have recently been experienced in the Western Cape have also had a major effect on the pollution of our rivers especially in the urban areas where sewage pump-stations overflow because of these power outages. Because of the deteriorating state of urban rivers, the related health problems are transferred to the sea and our beaches and this can have a great negative influence on our tourism. It is therefore very important for all Water Services Authorities to ensure that the effect of these outages is minimised and that emergency plans are in place to manage these events.

Water resources management poses some interesting and demanding challenges. It is our duty to become actively involved in this process. It is only by working together that we will be successful. One of the objectives of the National Water Act is to promote public awareness and stakeholder in water resource management.

The objective is to involve communities and water users at local level and to devolve some of the water management functions to decentralized water management institutions.

We are anxious to ensure that Water User Associations could contribute to the involvement of all users in local water management and operation of schemes. Indeed, we believe that the Water User Associations may be able to provide effective structures through which partnerships between municipalities and commercial and emerging farmers can be established. 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.

The establishment of Catchment Management Agencies is critical in this respect. There are already four Catchment Management Agencies formally established in South Africa with the Inkomati being the first. The Breede-Overberg Catchment Management Agency is also established and I am awaiting the recommendations for the governing board from the Advisory Committee that I appointed to oversee this process.

I am aware that the Gouritz Water Management Area, where we are today, also finalized the proposal for the establishment of the Gouritz Catchment Management Agency and that the input from the public and stakeholders were very favourable and supportive of this new institution. The active involvement of the Catchment Management Forums in this area is especially heartening and I believe that participation in water resource management issues are already on a high level of involvement.

We must strive to manage our water resources to achieve the most beneficial use of water in the interests of the nation as a whole – this includes a constitutional mandate for water reform.

One of the primary principles of the National Water Act, 1998 is that the nation's water resources be managed to achieve optimum long-term social and economic benefit for society from their use. It is also recognised that water allocations may have to change over time to continually meet this objective. The Act gives highest priority to water for the Reserve, which includes water for basic human needs and for the natural environment.

Beyond this, water should be allocated to ensure that the greatest overall social and economic benefits are achieved. Consideration therefore needs to be given to the social and economic benefits as well as the potential disbenefits to society, of water being made available to competing optional uses.

The water allocation reform process is getting on the way in different parts of the country. It is essential that water allocations also be more equitable to all users and potential users. Land reform must be managed with the inclusion of water entitlements to ensure sustainable agricultural benefit.

Joint ventures between commercial farmers and emerging farmers must be encouraged. My Department does have a financial assistance programme in place also to assist in the infrastructure needs of emerging farmers within Water User Associations. Let us make use of these initiatives to promote equitable water re-allocation to all.