

**Launch of a partnership with Swimming South Africa**  
**Speech by Mrs Lindiwe Hendricks, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry**  
**Victoria Lake Club, Germiston Lake, Germiston, Johannesburg**  
**3 November 2006**

Programme Director  
President of Swimming South Africa  
Chief Executive Officer of Swimming South Africa  
Representative from the Mayor's office  
Distinguished Guests  
Participants  
Ladies and Gentlemen

I am pleased to be here today to officially launch the partnership between the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry and Swimming South Africa.

It is often said that "Water is Life", but we know water can also take life away.

On 22<sup>nd</sup> September this year 11 people were performing a traditional ritual in the Orange River, downstream from the Gariiep Dam. They were unaware that the sirens going off meant that they should leave the river as the sluice gates were about to be opened to release water, nor did they understand the warning signs. Once the gates were opened, the water levels rose and despite a rescue attempt by the local police, eight of group were swept downstream and drowned.

Statistics of Lifesaving South Africa and the South African Police Service show that 64% of drownings in South Africa occur in rivers and dams – with an estimated 94% of those who have drowned in such instances being black people.

Programme Director, South Africa's inland water resources include 22 major rivers, 165 large dams and in excess of 4 000 medium and small dams on public and private land, with hundreds of small rivers. These water resources can be used for a number of sporting and recreational purposes yet because of our past where black people were excluded from access to these facilities and were not taught how to swim or participate in other water sports, today there is little recreational use by black people of our fresh water resources; and engaging in such activities is perceived to be an elitist pastime. In addition there is a lack of safety awareness and how to responsibly enjoy the water, resulting in unfortunate mishaps.

Ladies and Gentlemen, as most of you know, our Government is the trustee for all water resources in the country. And as a semi-arid country, South Africa requires sound water resource management strategies and initiatives to ensure that the use of our water resources is undertaken in a sustainable and equitable manner. The use of our water resources for recreational purposes is therefore important to the government and is in line with our existing legislation.

To ensure that all of our people are able to have access and to safely enjoy our natural resources my Department, the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry, has developed a Policy for Recreational Water Use. In co-operation with relevant stakeholders we aim to:

- Regulate, control and manage the manner, purpose and extent to which water resources are used;
- Ensure that industry norms and standards are adhered to;
- Promote the safe use of water;
- Establish linkages with other structures in government to jointly manage the responsibility for the sustainable management and use of water resources for recreational purposes; and
- Ensure stakeholder and role-player empowerment with regard to recreational water use through sufficient communication and capacity building.

Until now my Department has not been actively involved in any recreational water use safety programme, with our focus being on other areas of dam safety and security. With increased accidents and drownings in freshwater

resources it is imperative that we establish relationships with relevant organisations to address this issue. When Swimming South Africa approached my Department to jointly address safety in dams and rivers we supported this arrangement, and today we are celebrating the establishment of this partnership and the Memorandum of Agreement that has been signed.

This initiative, called the Rural Splash Programme, will ensure that our water resources can be accessed and used; and that the safety of our communities, particularly the safety of our children, is addressed. It is through such initiatives lives can be saved and our people will be given the opportunity to fully benefit from our water resources.

The Rural Splash Programme is a partnership that also includes the departments of Education and Sports and Recreation who will play a vital role in the implementation of the programme. The programme has three main elements:

- **Firstly in ‘Creating awareness around the safety of the water source’**  
My Department, as the lead agent, will have to provide technical information on the state of dams or rivers. Such information would be on the quality and state of the water, infrastructure and the possibility of dangerous animals in or near the water source.
- **Secondly in ‘Providing Education to learners and educators’**  
My Department will work with the Department of Education to lead this process, especially in providing Swimming South Africa access to schools; and
- **Thirdly in: ‘Ensuring Skills Development by teaching communities to swim’**  
This element is the crux of the programme. The Department of Sport and Recreation South Africa is the lead agent and will need to make resources such as equipment and instructors available in order for Swimming South Africa to provide the necessary training.

The benefits of this partnership include:

- (i) local implementation of awareness and capacity building through an established, dedicated and skilled organisation, such as Swimming South Africa; and
- (ii) supporting transformation in swimming by creating opportunities for previously disadvantaged people to become interested in swimming and possibly become involved at a competitive level;

This partnership will result in my Department increasing its involvement with water safety awareness issues and thereby complying with the requirements of the National Water Act, in which we have a regulatory responsibility to make water resource safety information available. This information will be made available through a communication and media campaign in support of the Rural Splash Programme. The Department of Water Affairs and Forestry’s own communication plan emphasises strengthening the Department’s engagement with the public, including use of water for recreational purposes.

Through this Rural Splash programme and our communication initiatives we look forward to empowering rural communities to swim and be safe near water, and make water resources more accessible to them.

Over time we look forward to expanding this partnership to include other Departments such as Health, Environmental Affairs and Tourism, and Safety and Security.

In conclusion, I would like to thank everyone for their contribution to making today’s programme a success, particularly Swimming South Africa and all the other stakeholders and role-players. I would also like to thank the officials of my Department who along with Swimming South Africa have driven the programme with a lot of passion and hard work.

Initiatives such as this contribute to creating an age of hope for the people of South Africa.

**“Be Safe, Learn to Swim”**

I thank you.