

WeedBuster Week 2006
Speech by Mrs Lindiwe Hendricks, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
Wesbank No. 1 Primary School, Delft, Western Cape
13 October 2006

Members of Parliament
Councillors
Distinguished Guests
Programme Director
Ladies, Gentlemen and learners

Molweni, Good Morning, Goeiemôre

1. Introduction

I am pleased to be here at the Wesbank Primary School in Delft to celebrate WeedBuster Week and to rejoice in our efforts in protecting our environment, which is often a silent partner in our efforts to restore the dignity of this country and its people. Thirty years ago, in 1976, students took the lead in protesting against their dignity being taken away by the Apartheid state. In attaining democracy in 1994 the democratic government committed itself to give our people back their dignity, and has been doing so through providing access to water, sanitation, electricity, housing, education, social welfare and much more; including and very importantly access to the environment. It is critical that as we create a better life for our people that we ensure the environment, and factors that affect the environment such as having sufficient water and good quality water, are not neglected so that we create a country and a society that is desirable to live in and is sustainable for future generations.

This year as we celebrate the 30 year anniversary of these uprisings, we recognise the important part that the youth have had and continue to have in shaping this country. The challenges for the youth of today are very different and I believe that looking at environmental issues, water issues and the economy should be very high on the agenda of today's young people.

Our event here today is to celebrate the splendour of our indigenous plant species; and highlight the dangers and problems created by alien invasive plants to our environment, our water resources, and to our economy – so that all of us, especially the youth, get involved, get their hands dirty and play their role in removing these plants.

2. Challenges of Invasive Alien Plants in South Africa

Invasive alien plants 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. As learners and our future generation you need to be more aware of these plants so that you can take help take responsibility for removing them and protecting our natural resources.

There is no dispute - invasive alien vegetation is a real challenge to us in protecting our natural heritage. There is enough evidence 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. These problems will arise because of the damage invasive species cause to the environment and the economy, which includes:

- Invasive alien plants reducing our water supply. Estimates indicate that these plants are guzzling up 7% of South Africa's annual water run-off. And what is especially alarming is that this figure will get progressively worse if nothing is done. Water is essential not only for our basic needs but for industry to develop and grow – new mines, new factories, and new offices and hotels all need water. The international music star JayZ who is in the country this week is also promoting access to water because he recognises how critical water is for South Africa and Africa's survival and growth.
- Invasive alien plants degrade our rich biological diversity. One of the reasons people travel to South Africa and the Western Cape is because of its natural beauty and environment, if invasive alien plants overrun this environment they damage our tourism industry;

- Invasives damage the ecological integrity of our natural systems and also create problems for planting of crops. People depend on these natural systems for their livelihoods and our country cannot do without food production; and
- Invasive alien plants fuel the wild fires that cause havoc in our country; and they make fire management difficult;

To deal with the problem of invasives effectively, we need the right tools in our armoury. Prevention is obviously better than cure, and considerable improvements have 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, and how we must deal with them, also cannot be stressed enough.

3. The Western Cape and Alien Invasive Plants

Programme Director, I am pleased that today's event is being held in the Western Cape, which is world-renowned for its unique indigenous plant species.

Table Mountain National Park alone has over 2 100 indigenous plant species - which is more than what Canada or the United Kingdom has for their entire country. Invasive alien plants threaten this diversity, particularly because many of the invasive species are very fire-prone.

The Western Cape makes up 10% of South Africa's landscape and boasts one of six floral kingdoms in the world — the Cape Floristic Kingdom. The Cape Floristic Kingdom contains one of the highest levels of species richness, with 5 880 species and 68% species that occur nowhere else in the world (known as *endemism*). A study in 1998 estimated that 4,84% of the Western Cape was invaded by invasive alien species and new studies are underway to reassess the extent of invasion. The species that mostly invade the Western Cape are *Acacia* sp. and *Eucalyptus* sp., with invading species such as bugweed and pampass grass emerging. Did you know that pine trees that escaped from plantations have invaded our mountainous areas and cause damage?

South Africa is a water-scarce region and we cannot afford to lose our most valuable natural resource to thirsty, water-guzzling invasive alien plants. The mean annual run-off of the primary catchments in the Western Cape is estimated at 6 555 million cubic metres of water, whilst the annual loss of run-off caused by invasive alien plants in the region is 1 036 million cubic metres. This equates to 15,82% water use by invasive alien plants, or 166 mm of rainfall. Water scarcity is not new to the people of the Western Cape; and you are all aware of how this part of the Western Cape has suffered from water restrictions and that water needs to be brought to the Cape Metropolitan from the other areas. Simply put: invasive species cannot be allowed to consume the water we need to meet basic needs and to sustain and promote development. And I want you to join me in declaring invasive alien plants 'Public Enemy Number One'.

4. Working for Water Campaign

In order to combat alien invasive plants the government established the Working for Water Campaign in 1995 to clear our country of these plants; and it is a great honour to celebrate the 11th year of the *Working for Water* Programme in the Western Cape, which is the "birth place" of this internationally acclaimed Programme. This campaign was started in 1995 with a grant of R25-million from the then Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) Fund. Prof. Kader Asmal, the Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry at the time, was the inspiration behind the Programme, with former President Nelson Mandela as the Patron in Chief.

As the Programme grew, its social focus broadened. It seeks to benefit the poorest of the poor, and this has led to a particular focus on single-parent households. It has provided work opportunities to those living with HIV and Aids, thereby restoring their dignity and respect. It has also endeavoured to provide opportunities to victims of crime, as well as to those that live in areas of violence and intolerance, and those that foster orphans.

All of this has been done without compromising the Programme's 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.

Twenty thousand people are employed annually in the Programme, of which 52% are female, 19% youth and 1% disabled. During 2004/2005, 142 417 initial and 507 139 hectares follow-up clearing were completed. The benefits from clearing the invasives have been shown time and again with improved water flow, better fire control management, less risk of mud slides, better water quality, and greater biological diversity.

With the widespread prevalence of poverty, we should remember that the natural environment is a powerful ally in our efforts to create jobs and create a better life for our people. So not only are we creating jobs through clearing the invasive aliens and empowering the people who work in the programme, but there are also opportunities for using the wood and plants that have been cleared to make furniture, coal and woodchips. The improved natural environment also creates tourism opportunities and prevents job losses that would have inevitably resulted from an area being overrun by invasive alien plants.

5. WeedBuster Campaign

This week with our celebration of the WeedBuster campaign we aim to create greater awareness of the need to manage and contain invasive alien plants, because even through so many hectares of land have been cleared there is still much to be done and we cannot allow the situation to get out of control. Our theme "**Stop the Invasion, Plant Indigenous**" highlights the very real threat caused by invasive alien plants and the need for ordinary people to respect their local environment, and plant indigenous vegetation and trees.

The campaign involves many different government departments and is being led by my Department, the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry, through the *Working for Water* Programme. The support by a number of partners and stakeholders is necessary for the success of this programme and is appreciated; I am very pleased that this year we have been able to include the Department of Education, and that schools have become actively involved.

The problem of invasive plants affects most countries, and countries around the world have united to protect their water resources by preventing and controlling the spread of invasive alien plants. In our efforts to combat invasives South Africa has partnered with Australia and New Zealand, and we are part of the broader Global Invasive Species Programme (GISP).

6. Conclusion

By far, the most powerful tool in our armoury for dealing with the problem revolves around educational and awareness initiatives. Annual events such as Water, Arbor and WeedBuster Week, present us with opportunities to unite as custodians of our natural heritage and they raise our awareness to exercise this custodianship responsibly. Educators play a vital role in raising awareness of invasive alien plants and in promoting corrective action. And for this, I salute you.

Let us unite, and share our knowledge of our indigenous vegetation in all our schools. If the enthusiasm and passion of these learners here today is anything to go by, I am confident that we can win the battle against invasive alien plants and safeguard our indigenous legacy.

Being able to identify invasive alien vegetation is not enough - we need to empower ourselves to also identify those indigenous plants which alien vegetation replaces. What we do in our gardens is perhaps the best barometer to judge this awareness. I would like to challenge all citizens to start the battle in their backyards, by identifying and removing invasives; and promoting the planting of indigenous species, in order to protect our natural heritage. From our backyards we must move to clearing community parks and gardens of invasives; and there are a number of ways to do this, for example, by initiating or joining a volunteer hacking group.

I am passionate about this wonderful Programme, and like my predecessors, I would like to see it climbing to new heights in conserving our environment and creating sustainable opportunities for our people.

Finally, our presence here today signifies our ongoing commitment to eradicating invasive alien plants and contributing towards creating an environment that is sustainable for future generations.

I thank you — ndiyabulela