

Opening of the Fourth Natural Forests and Woodland Symposium
Speech by Ms L Mossop-Rousseau, Chief Director: Forestry
on behalf of the Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry, Ms BP Sonjica
Port Elizabeth
15 May 2006

Delegates, guests and visitors to South Africa, I wish to welcome you all on behalf of Minister Sonjica who expressed her apologies not to be present here today to mark this Fourth Natural Forests and Woodlands Symposium, hosted by the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry. She particularly requested me to welcome all the international delegates. Welcome to South Africa, the Eastern Cape and Port Elizabeth in particular. Several of you came to South Africa to share with us your research findings and knowledge about a range of subjects that relate to natural forests and woodlands. Ever since the First Symposium in 1998 there had been interest and participation from beyond our borders. We are grateful that this Symposium again captured your attention and that you are willing to share with us.

The Natural Forests and Woodland Symposia are presented by the Department to provide an opportunity for leaders in science, new technology and policy opinion leaders to talk to each other and to people who can apply your innovations for the benefit of our society. It is encouraging that a good number of the Department's Forestry staff has registered to attend. Colleagues, this is a valuable opportunity to gain information first hand. Do not let the opportunity pass you by. We also welcome our colleagues from other Departments and Organisations. Forestry is not the exclusive domain of this Department. There are other organs of State that play a crucial part in the sustainable management of our forests and your presence here is highly relevant. I sincerely hope that it will prove to be worth your while and will exceed your expectations in terms of what you gain from being here. Of course the symposium is about more than the information that is presented, it is also about the networking and linkages that we build. Therefore every participant is important.

It is the Department's purpose with the Symposium to bring people together and create a sense of unity around our common interest in the sustainable management and conservation of our precious forests. This is the Fourth Symposium of its kind and I believe that previous symposia were well attended, offered valuable scientific and policy information and helped to strengthen the very important links among researchers, policy developers and implementers.

When you look at the proceedings of these symposia, one can see that there are trends on some themes. With the natural forest classification process for example, one sees a progression from its inception at the time of the Second Symposium to the presentation of a proposed system at this symposium. One also sees the progression in terms of our legislative tools that enable us to implement our policies. When the First Symposium was hosted in 1998, the National Forests Act, 1998 (Act 84 of 1998) and the National Veld and Forest Fire Act, 1998 (Act 101 of 1998) were both being finalised. By the time of the Third Symposium we were looking forward to the release of the first Regulations. Now, at this Symposium you will begin to reflect on the legislation, its implementation and some of the results, deficiencies or problems that are being experienced. It is about ten years now since the Forestry White Paper was developed that provided the foundation for the legislation that we currently have. Newly emerging challenges may by now become evident.

All the progress in policy development and implementation of course depends on the valuable research that many of you are doing and information that is shared during these symposia. One can also see a progression in the change of emphasis in research, as reflected in the titles of your presentations. It will be unfortunate if there is no progression. For this reason it is so important for the Department to present this platform where we can all share our work and determine what progress is being made and where the new research needs and opportunities are emerging.

As was done at previous symposia I wish to use this opportunity to say a few words about developments in the Department.

Restructuring has been mentioned in the past as a priority matter within the Department. Significant portions of the Department's indigenous forests have been transferred to SANParks since the last Symposium as part of this process. Some of our plantation areas along the eastern escarpment of Mpumalanga have also been designated for conversion and rehabilitation to natural vegetation. As such these areas are earmarked for transfer to become part of the Kruger to Canyons conservation corridor initiative. There are still a significant number of natural forests for which the Department remains responsible in the form of State forests. Of course the restructuring process is an ambitious undertaking and it will probably continue for several years to come. There has also been further restructuring within the Department. A most significant development in recent times

is that Forestry has been elevated to the status of a full branch within the Department and a Deputy Director-General for Forestry will be appointed within this year.

The Department has enjoyed the benefit of international donor support for more than ten years. Much of the restructuring has been supported by these donor agencies, not only through financing, but also through their technical expertise. During the last financial year the donor projects that supported forestry all came to their conclusion. The Department is now on its own. With the departure of the donor agencies we also lost the presence of their staff. Much of the work they have been doing now falls upon our own Departmental staff. Even though the Department is short staffed it is ambitious in its undertakings. Let us harness the expertise we have and keep up the good work we are doing.

One of our ambitious new undertakings relate to woodlands. This had been an area of little attention for a number of years. However, you will learn through the course of this event that the Department has now approved a strategy and an implementation plan that will guide the roll out of our policy in terms of woodlands. You will realise that your contributions as an academic community had been significant in revealing the importance of woodlands as a forest resource in South Africa. Thus you have shaped our policies and much of the subject specific guidelines pertaining to the management of this forest resource. There is plenty of scientific information available about the woodlands, yet we have to realise that we still don't know as much as we should. So by the time we present the Fifth Symposium we will be looking forward to the new research findings you will be presenting. The Department hopes that this Symposium will provide you adequate opportunity to set your aims and identify new priority research opportunities. Many of you are already busy with relevant new research and we will be looking forward to the outcomes.

As a research community it will be of interest to you that the Department is in the process of developing a more strategic approach towards supporting and promoting forestry research in South Africa. Our mandate in the legislation is clear. There is a specific task team working on this project and we are looking forward to producing a protocol document and a research strategy that will indicate the Department's role and research priorities. This should also provide direction in terms of the budget provisions needed for research in the short to medium term.

As much as it is important to do research in forestry, it is also important that we develop a human resource base of skilled and capable forestry professionals, not only for the management of the country's commercial forest resources, but also for the indigenous forests and woodlands. It is being realised in the sector that there is a skills shortage developing which may in future become a threat to the sustainable management of our forests. It is important that we have symposia like these where we can refresh and update our existing core of professionals. It is important that we should also recruit people into the forestry profession. This is a challenge for which we should engage with our Education colleagues, because the development of the required skills base starts at school, where the basic foundations of mathematics, geography and natural sciences are laid. We should of course also ask ourselves if we contribute adequately to the education of our nation. We should at least ensure that the people of our country have a basic understanding of forestry, because all our people in South Africa depend on forest goods and services in some form every day. One just isn't sure whether they quite realise that.

It is evident that we have a few challenges ahead of us. As an audience concerned with the natural forest resources, you realise that the conservation of these present real challenges in the face of demand for resources. In some cases developers fix their targets on the land occupied by forests with the hope of financial gain through replacement of the forests with other forms of land use. In other cases people depend on the actual forest resources for sustaining their livelihoods. In our policies and approaches to regulation we should be balanced. This is in fact a principle of our policy and Forestry legislation. It calls for good judgment on the part of those that have to enforce the law, and it requires that we educate people about the value and importance of our forests.

A challenge that we should not overlook is that of Climate Change. It is something you will be discussing during the symposium and surely we will be talking about it during similar future events

I hope the Symposium will empower you and inspire you to ensure that we retain our forests for future generations while optimising the benefits that local communities derive from them in the present. On behalf of Minister Sonjica I thank all of you that contributed to the event, including the organising committee, Merle Falken and her team that arranged the logistics, those that contributed resources in the form of funding for participants and gifts. Our colleagues from the Working for Water Programme contributed some gifts for all of you, while some of our international delegates were funded by donors, including the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO). A special word of thanks and best wishes also goes to each of you who will be presenting.

With that, ladies and gentlemen, I thank you and declare the proceedings of the symposium open and wish you a successful conference.