

**Arbor Week 2007 KwaZulu-Natal Event**  
**Speech by Mrs LB Hendricks, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry**  
**Delivered on her behalf by the MEC for Agriculture and Environmental Affairs**  
**Multi-Purpose Community Centre, Mbazwana, KwaZulu-Natal**  
**2 November 2007**

MEC for Agriculture and Environmental Affairs  
Honourable District Mayor  
Honourable Municipal Mayor  
Councillors  
Amakhosi  
Programme Director  
Ladies and Gentlemen

## **1. Introduction**

It is an honour for me to be here on this occasion and to join you in planting trees in your community. This event was supposed to take place on the 4<sup>th</sup> of September during our National Arbor Week and was rescheduled because of the tragic accident where some of your leadership lost their lives. Trees are often planted in memory of people, and I would like to dedicate the trees we plant today to their memory. Trees can grow and survive for hundreds of years - and once fully grown they bring so many benefits to us, to our children and to their children; so while we plant trees to grow and support the future we remember those that have come before us.

This area already has a number of trees and you have the forestry plantations nearby, why then do we want to plant even more trees and what are these benefits of trees?

Trees make an area look more beautiful, they provide shade, protection from the wind, protect the soil and some trees give us fruit. Often industry and factories create smoke and pollution, which the trees help us to remove. The more trees we plant the better it is for our environment. We also know that the wood from the trees is also very useful and that the forests can be used for bee keeping or growing mushrooms and for medicine.

Because of the importance of trees the United Nations want to plant one billion trees across the world; and during Arbor Week, which was launched by our President on 1<sup>st</sup> September in Ga-Rankuwa, Tshwane, we said that over the next year and for the coming few years we would be planting at least one million trees per year in South Africa. These million trees would mainly be fruit trees so that while we are planting trees and making our country more beautiful and protecting the environment, we are also helping our people with food.

When I grew up we had fruit trees everywhere and when we were hungry we just needed to take some from the tree. But in many part of our country, particularly in our townships and many rural areas there are not enough trees, and there are few fruit trees - leaving these areas unattractive, dry and dusty.

For all these reasons, and more, my Department is committed to planting trees and to ensuring that communities are empowered to both contribute to nature by planting trees, and to share in the benefits from trees and the environment. The trees that we are planting will be in homesteads, schools, streets and parks.

## **2. Forestry industry**

Ladies and Gentlemen, in addition to the million trees campaign we are also working with the forestry industry and communities to expand the number of forests that we have because of the many benefits of forests for communities, and for industry through the use of the timber and wood for furniture, pulp and paper. The growth of the forestry industry is therefore very important to the government. We have made a commitment to increase the amount of forestry land under cultivation in KwaZulu-Natal and Eastern Cape, which will open the way for small-scale forestry growers. There are a few things holding back the growth of the industry such as land claims and licensing for afforestation, and we are working to address these issues.

Communities such as yours would be able to benefit from new forests through more than just the possibility of being able to get a job working in the forest. Through our Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment policies and the Forestry BEE Charter we will be seeing a lot more opportunities for community participation in the forestry industry, and already some rural communities have had greater participation in the forestry and the forestry products industry. The use of forests by rural communities also provides opportunities for economic advancement and prosperity, and can contribute to creating a better life for our people.

This Forestry BEE Charter will see increased ownership of forestry companies by black people, as well as, more black people and women involved in the management and operations of these companies. The Charter will increase the support that forestry companies give to small businesses and to enterprise development.

Through the Forestry BEE Charter we will also see an increase in the support that the forestry companies give to skills development. While they will be giving this support because of the requirements of the BEE Charter, they also know that there is a shortage of skills in the forestry sector and will help grow the number of skilled personnel. There are real opportunities for young people in the forestry industry, and I would encourage them to pursue careers in science and in forestry. My department also gives bursaries to students who study forestry. South Africa is a country in great need of a new generation of experts and I hope that some of them will come from this community.

A few years ago the government decided that the ownership and management of commercial forests should not be the responsibility of the state and since then the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry has embarked on a process of selling or transferring the state owned and managed forestry plantations. It is with great pleasure that I inform you today that I have approved the transfer of Mbazwana and Manzengwenya Plantations to the local communities. There are, however still a number of steps and process that we still need to go through before the transfer takes place.

Once the transfer happens it will be of critical importance that the operations continue to be profitable. I believe that the transfer of this asset will contribute to the development of the communities involved, and we would like to see that the forest is used sustainably for environmental, economic, educational, recreational, cultural, health and spiritual purposes.

The Provincial Department of Economic Development, Department of Land Affairs, Land Claims Commission and the Municipalities concerned, including Amakhosi, are very important in realizing our objectives. And we need to work with them to support the community in preserving the forest; promoting sustainable and efficient management; as well as the development of forests. All of us must ensure that the forests are for the benefit of the local community.

The restructuring of State forests has also resulted in innovative partnerships between rural communities and the private sector. These partnerships have led to rural communities holding shares in the ownership and control of the forest companies. This access to commercial forestry and exposure to large scale commercial forest management has contributed to poverty reduction through jobs, business opportunities and income generation. Through the small business support services of government we will need to increase our support to communities involved in the forestry industry as well as to the small-scale growers. It will be important for us to provide training in enterprise-management as well as training in the technical skills required to grow trees.

### **3. Fire Awareness**

Programme Director, one of the big threats to the sustainability of our forests are wild fires. The prevention of veld and forest fires are crucial if forestry is to continue contributing to the creation of a better life. Veld fires hinder economic growth and thereby exacerbate poverty. They destroy the livelihoods of poor communities and lead to loss of life. This year our country has experienced the worst forest fires ever, with close to 100 000 ha of forests burnt. Areas such as Winterton, Bergville, Escort, Melmoth, Nkandla and Paulpietersburg, were affected.

My Department administers the legislation (the National Veld and Forest Fire Act of 1998), which provides a variety of mechanisms, institutions, methods and practices for the prevention, combating and management of veld, forests and mountain fires throughout the country. These include the formation of Fire Protection Associations for the prevention, suppression and management of veld fires. At present there are 91 registered Fire Protection Associations. We are also supporting the Working on Fire programme which has played an important role in helping to combat the recent fires. This programme provides employment and training to the youth particularly from poorer communities. Working on Fire provides employment and training opportunities to over 1,500 people, of whom 28% are women and 95% are youth.

To support our efforts in fighting fires we have established a Fire Danger Rating System so that we are more aware of where fires can happen. In partnership with the Weather Service we alert people through the daily weather news if there is a danger of veld fires in their area. We need the support of our people to prevent veld fires by being careful especially when the fire danger rating is high or extreme, which is usually when the weather is hot and there has been little rain.

Landowners have responsibilities to help prevent the spread of fires by preparing and maintaining a firebreak around their property; being part of the Fire Protection Association or having trained and fully equipped fire-fighting personnel on their properties during the fire season and having adequate fire fighting equipment in the case of a veld fire.

For the rest of us we must be sure not to throw away cigarettes that are still alight; not to light open fires when we cannot control them and these fires should not be left unattended as the strong winds can cause these fires to spread. They should be carefully extinguished, when finished, and the ashes carefully disposed of. We must also be particularly careful during the fire season about using fire to smoke out hives, to get honey. Let us avoid uncontrolled and unwanted fires.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In conclusion, I am encouraged that so many of you have come here today to support our efforts to plant trees and to green our country. I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to all partners who participated in the organization of this event, may it be the beginning of a long-lasting working relationship aimed at greening our country.

Let us all carry these messages back home with us:

"Plant a Tree - Grow our Future"

"Veld and Forest Fires destroy life, so let us PREVENT THEM"

Thank you.