

Launch of the Rural Splash Programme
Speech by Mrs LB Hendricks, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
Sondokhulu, Emabomvini, Maphumulo, KwaZulu-Natal
20 March 2007

Programme Director
President of Swimming South Africa
Inkosi Ngubane
Distinguished Guests
Maphumulo Community
Ladies and Gentlemen

1. Introduction

It is an honour to be here in Maphumulo to celebrate Water Week with you. During this week we are holding events all over South Africa to make people aware of the importance of water to our country. Yesterday I was in Limpopo where we were launching a new dam that is going to be constructed in Sekhukhune; when it is built the dam will provide water to over 800 000 people who currently do not have adequate access to water. The water from the dam will also be used by the mines in that area and will create jobs.

Water is an important part of economic growth and in creating a better life for our people. Since 1994 our government has made a lot of progress in bringing water to people, and by 2008 we are targeting that everyone in our country will have access to water, so that we are able to address this basic human right. And as we celebrate Human Rights Day tomorrow we should recognise how much we have achieved since 1994 in empowering our people and in addressing their basic human rights by giving them access to water, housing, education, and more. However we still have much that needs to be done, and we cannot relax until we have addressed the poverty that exists in our country.

2. National Water Week

Programme Director, our theme for this year's Water Week is "Water is life – protect our scarce resources". We have chosen this theme to make people aware of the importance of water but to recognise that there is a limited amount of water available in our country and that we need to conserve and protect it. Because of economic development, growth in the population, and the urgent need to supply basic water services to millions of people there has been an increasing demand for water, and it is therefore necessary that we take steps to make sure that there is some water for all of us.

With its low rainfall, compared to most other countries in the world, South Africa is regarded as a dry country. We have less rain per year when compared with the international average and because it gets very hot in our country we lose a lot of water through evaporation. This year the hot weather and low rainfall means that we have parts of the country that are experiencing a drought. This drought has impacted on the grazing for animals, crops failing and for many communities will mean less food on their tables. We should therefore not take the water we have available for granted.

3. Swimming Safety

Ladies and Gentlemen, National Water Week is not only about the water available for drinking or using for irrigation and industry, but also about enjoying our water for recreational and other purposes. There is something special about swimming in cool water on a hot day or going fishing in the dam or river. There are also many who use water for religious reasons. However, in using our water resources but we must be mindful of the dangers of water especially if we do not take care or we do not know how to swim. Unfortunately because of our past it is mainly black South Africans that are not taught how to swim and as a result an estimated 94% of those who have drowned are black people.

A few months ago my department entered into a partnership with Swimming South Africa to address the problem; and as a result of this partnership we have launched the Rural Splash Programme, so that people in rural communities are taught how to swim and enable them to enjoy and be safe when using our water resources.

In the weeks prior to the launch of this partnership we were saddened by the loss of life when one of the dams in the Free State released water into the river, and the group of people who were holding a religious ceremony in the river did not understand the warning signs and were swept away and drowned. Since then we have, in partnership with local government, traditional leaders and other structures, created greater awareness on the safe use of water.

Too often we are reminded of the urgency of our work in training and educating people especially the youth in how to swim and use water safely, and the need to rapidly roll out this 'rural splash' programme by the drownings that regularly occur in our dams and rivers. Only this weekend three lives were lost in the Nandoni Dam and a few weeks ago two ten year old girls drowned in the Brandvlei Dam. Over the December holidays there were many other drowning incidents.

Many of these drownings could have been prevented had these children known how to swim and how to avoid some of the possible dangers when crossing streams, swimming and other recreational activities. It is therefore of critical importance that we as parents encourage our children to learn how to swim through this rural splash programme, but also for us to teach them about the need to respect water and understand the possible dangers associated with rivers and dams.

Ladies and Gentlemen, my Department is committed to increasing its involvement with water safety awareness issues and thereby comply 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 media campaign and will be linked to the Rural Splash Programme. My Department's own communication plan emphasises strengthening the Department's engagement with the public, including use of water for recreational purposes.

To ensure that all of our people are able to have access and to safely enjoy our natural resources, my Department has also 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.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, programme director, while we must respect our water resources we cannot pretend that they do not exist and become fearful of them. Human Rights Day is also about recognising that our people be given the opportunity to benefit from what our country has to offer include recreational use of our water resources. These resources are not there only for the wealthy to enjoy.

While we are promoting the enjoyment and benefits of our water resources it is necessary that we also look after these resources, and during this week my Department will be working with several municipalities to have river cleaning campaigns. We will also be creating awareness of water issues during this week through drama, poetry and music, as well as by taking school children on tours of water treatment plants and teaching them how to test the quality of water.

Lastly, I would like to thank everyone for their contribution to making today's programme a success, particularly Inkosi Ngubane, the Maphumulo community, 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.

“Be Safe, Learn to Swim”

I thank you.