

WeedBuster Week 2007
Speech by Mrs LB Hendricks, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
Klein Pella, Northern Cape
8 October 2007

MEC,
Mayor and Councillors,
Members of the Portfolio Committee on Water Affairs and Forestry,
Members of the Select Committee on Land and Environmental Affairs,
Distinguished Guests,
Programme Director,
Ladies and Gentlemen and learners

Dumelang, Good Morning, Goeie Môre.

I am honoured to be here in the Namaqua district to launch the National WeedBuster Week and to join this community in celebrating our efforts to protect the environment. This event is the first opportunity I have had to visit Pella and I am very pleased to be here.

Our country has a very beautiful and diverse environment from the sand dunes and beautiful flowers of the Namaqualand to the forests of Knysna, and the beaches of Durban. It is the diversity of this country that defines us and it is these natural resources that we must protect; to quote President Mbeki in his speech at the adoption of the new Constitution in 1996:

"I owe my being to the hills and the valleys, the mountains and the glades, the rivers, the deserts, the trees, the flowers, the seas and the ever-changing seasons that define the face of our native land.

My body has frozen in our frosts and in our latter day snows. It has thawed in the warmth of our sunshine and melted in the heat of the midday sun. The crack and the rumble of the summer thunders, lashed by startling lightening, have been a cause both of trembling and of hope.

The fragrances of nature have been as pleasant to us as the sight of the wild blooms of the citizens of the veld.

The dramatic shapes of the Drakensberg, the soil-coloured waters of the Lekoa, iGqili noThukela, and the sands of the Kgalagadi, have all been panels of the set on the natural stage on which we act out the foolish deeds of the theatre of our day.

At times, and in fear, I have wondered whether I should concede equal citizenship of our country to the leopard and the lion, the elephant and the springbok, the hyena, the black mamba and the pestilential mosquito.

But amidst of all the beauty and the wonders of our country, we must not forget our challenge of being a water scarce country, and the role this resource plays in our environment and our economy. This past year we have experienced an unusually hot summer, with less rainfall; which has resulted in many of our dams being at very low levels. When compared to last year this time our average dam levels are 20% lower – however this average picture hides that in some areas such as Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal who have received good rainfalls, their dam levels are doing okay; while in provinces such as Limpopo and North West there have been severe water restrictions imposed on communities and farmers. Fortunately the rains in many parts of the country over the past few days have brought us some relief, yet we cannot relax and must still protect our water resources, our most precious of natural resources.

The damage caused by alien invasive species for our environment and for our water resources are significant, and the removal of these species, as well as preventing them from spreading is a priority. The estimates we have show that between 6% - 7% of our annual water run-off is being consumed by invasive alien plants, and what is especially alarming is that this figure would get progressively worse if we do not address the problem. In an environment where we already have water scarcity we cannot afford to loose such a large amount of water to alien invasive species. The negative impacts of alien invasive species also do not stop there - others include:

- The degradation of our rich biological diversity which is our heritage and must be protected. Our biological diversity is also important because it underpins our tourism industry and creates jobs.

- The damage done to the ecological integrity of our natural systems on which we all depend for our livelihoods. For example, when species such as Water Hyacinth take over a dam or a section of a river, they do not allow certain species of fish and animal life to continue.
- The problems of fire management, and the havoc that alien-invasive fuelled wildfires wreak on us from time to time; which happens because the alien invasive species burn quicker and more intensely – they also use fire as a means to spread so after the fires one can see the alien species growing faster.
- These species also take over productive land, which limits the land available for planting agricultural products or food; they also can be poisonous so cannot be eaten by animals and limit the land available for grazing.

It is critical that the public are aware of the problems created and damage caused by alien invasive species, so that they do not unintentionally bring banned species into the country or spread them from one area to the next. Prevention is obviously better than cure, and improvements must 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 as they do, and how we deal with them, also cannot be stressed enough.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the Working for Water programme, which is led by my department, was born out of the need to address the problems of alien invasive species. Through the clearing, burning, use of biological control and spraying of herbicides, we are tackling this massive problem of removing the alien invasive species. Importantly, in doing so we are creating jobs and are contributing to poverty alleviation.

I am very aware of the problems of poverty in this area and that Namaqualand has been recognised by the government as a poverty node that receives attention under our national poverty alleviation programmes. Prior to 1994 our country has a long history of ignoring the economic development of people in small rural towns, and it is important that the democratic government addresses the needs of communities such as Pella.

Through the Working for Water Programme, and other Expanded Public Works Programmes, we are helping to create some employment and are giving people skills that they can use once they have left the programme. I am pleased to hear of the positive impact that Working for Water has had on employment in Pella, and the 55 opportunities that Working for Water provides to contractors and workers from this area, result in approximately 300 people, or a third of this town's population, directly or indirectly benefiting from the Programme.

Throughout the country, Working for Water has made a huge impact in communities such as Pella, with approximately 30 000 work opportunities being created annually. This programme has targeted the unemployed and ensured that women are given an equal opportunity for employment in the programme. We have also provided work opportunities to the youth, people with disabilities and to those living with HIV and Aids, thereby helping to restoring their dignity and respect.

While Working for Water is an Expanded Public Works Programme, and therefore does not provide permanent or full time employment, we have over the 12 years since its creation ensured that the many tens of thousand of people who have passed through the programme are given the dignity of being able to work and earn an income for themselves, as well as, given skills development and training. These skills are important so that once people exit the programme (to create space for new entrants) they are able to use their new abilities to find alternative employment or even start their own business. We have seen many examples of people who have started very successful enterprises, some using the very alien species cleared to make crafts and manufacture household items. I have also been informed that there are plans to look at other businesses that can use the cleared invasives, such as charcoal, furniture, and firewood.

Not that far from here, in the small Northern Cape village of Kakamas near Kamieskroon, there is a craft business set up that is using the branches of alien vegetation to manufacture what are known as 'memory sticks' that are used by computers. The project creates jobs and contributes to the alleviation of poverty through harnessing existing craft skills to something that is needed by businesses and people who use computers across the world.

I encourage the contractors in the Pella Clearing Project who are due to exit the programme to take that step so new people can benefit from the programme, but they must to use their new skills and knowledge of invasives to find other work or establish a small business like others have done, and to even create opportunities for others. I will speak to our Northern Cape regional office to look at bringing one of the government's small business support organisations to visit you in Pella so that you can explore opportunities for small businesses in this area.

Programme Director, in trying to create jobs and economic opportunities we should always remember that the natural environment can be a powerful ally in our efforts. So it is not only in the area of crafts or furniture manufacturing that opportunities exist. By clearing the invasives we make our environment more attractive for tourists to come and visit. And yes, people do want to come and visit places like Pella; tourists want to explore the different landscapes, cultures and history that exist across our vast and diverse country. More and more tourists are coming to South Africa, and more South African's are exploring their own country – many of whom are looking for interesting things to do and new places to visit. Our Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism informed us earlier this year that in 2006 there are over 8 million people coming from other countries to visit South Africa, and this was an increase of over 1 million people from the previous year. There are opportunities in this area.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I have already spoken about the impact that invasives have on farming and grazing land, the clearing of invasive species and the rehabilitation of that land will also mean that the land can be used for farming. I am informed that the Department of Agriculture has already assisted some contractors who have exited the programme with small scale farming opportunities. Existing farmers can also make use of the exiting Working for Water contractors, and use the contractors skills and knowledge of invasives to clear their farming land so that it can be productively used.

To conclude, through this year's WeedBuster Week we are showing the importance of protecting our natural resources and removing alien species, and that by removing invasives not only do we create a better environment but we can also create economic opportunities and employment. We need to educate people and create awareness of the problems of alien invasive species so that we are able to take control of this problem and prevent the spread and further damage that can be caused by invasives.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the Working for Water programme is more than just a job for many of those involved – it is contribution to improving the environment and to protecting our natural resources. I am encouraged by this programme and the work that is being done to clear the invasives in this area, and I ask that you keep up with the good work. I call upon all members of this community to continue being WeedBusters and fighting invasive alien plants.

I would like to acknowledge the presence of the Mayor and Councillors; and to thank the Local Government for their support of the Working for Water programme in the fight against the invasive alien species. Your ongoing support for this programme and working with the community to create new economic opportunities and contributing to creating a better life for our people is very important.

Finally, I would like to thank the organisers of this event who have gone to so much effort in arranging everything here today.

I thank you.