

Statement to Parliament on 'water crisis'
Speech by Mrs LB Hendricks, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
Parliament, Cape Town
11 March 2008

Madam Speaker
Honourable Members

Thank you Madam Speaker for the opportunity of making a statement on the so called 'water crisis' in our country. Water is a source of life and such a strategic resource that it is important that parliament and our society openly discuss and debate the issues affecting water. To engage in this debate we must be armed with information and empower ourselves to better understand how the water sector works. Misinformation will only create unnecessary panic and discontent, and I am sure that no one would desire that. Those who bandy about words like 'crisis' must surely have facts and information at their disposal before using such strong terms. I am therefore hoping through this statement to set the record straight so we all take responsibility for what we say.

As Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry I have nothing to hide on the state of our water sector, and we have been open and transparent in our presentations and inputs to the Portfolio Committee on Water Affairs and Forestry, who have been playing an excellent oversight role over the sector.

At the outset, I would like to share with you what the water situation in the country is, in terms of water storage and therefore water security. The 2007/08 summer rainfall season started off in October 2007 with well above normal water storages due to the good rainfalls over the largest part of the country. The above normal rainfall resulted in good runoff which is reflected in the good storage situation in our dams and rivers, across most parts of the country.

The result is that water storages in all the provinces are well above the average storage and most of the provincial storages equals or exceeds last year's storages. On a national level the current storage equals last year's storage of 86%.

In terms of macro water availability, there is no crisis, but we do face some challenges in other areas. My department have in-depth knowledge about the situation, with particular reference to the "hotspots". DWAF is well organised in terms of proactive water resource planning, project planning and design as well as national infrastructure implementation.

Although South Africa is a water scarce country with a highly skewed rainfall distribution pattern and subject to droughts we have planned for this by having a number of dams, strict water allocation processes, extensive networks of infrastructure that transfer water from different parts of the country, and a consistent campaign to remind our citizens to be water wise by using water sparingly. Although from time to time it becomes necessary to impose water restrictions during periods of drought.

South Africans can rest assured that we do not have a 'water crisis' resulting from poor planning; our planning systems are strong and we have looked at future water needs, however, we cannot allow that comfort to lead to inaction. Water should be a concern for all South Africans. Water in South Africa is supplied on a regional basis, so drought conditions and low dam levels in one part of the country may result in water restrictions in that area, however, dams in another part of the country may be full as a result of good rainfall. We have enough water in our rivers, dams and underground to supply water for socio economic growth and development, and we have programmes in place to ensure timely development of infrastructure to ensure future supply of water to our growing economy, whilst simultaneously addressing the imbalances of the past in regard to access to water for drinking purposes and productive use.

To improve our water availability we will also be clamping down on illegal water users, and we have plans in place for major new dams.

Each of the large metropolitan areas are required to do water reconciliation studies to determine scenarios of future water use and whether new infrastructure is required to meet future needs. Climate change, and its possible impact on water resource availability has been considered in these studies.

Much work has already been done in our water resources infrastructure, and between 2004 to 2006 nine water resources capital projects were completed at a cost of R1,3 billion, such as Nandoni dam (Limpopo) in 2006 and the Mooi-Mgemi Transfer Scheme (Phase 1 in KwaZulu-Natal) in 2004. We are also currently

implementing another 6 major water resources infrastructure projects at a projected cost of R8, 8 Billion, to be completed between 2008 and 2012, such as De Hoop dam in Limpopo and Berg Water Dam in the Western Cape and the Vaal River East-Subsystem Augmentation Scheme (VRESAP Pipeline), which will supply sufficient water to Eskom power stations and Sasol. In addition a further 9 major water resources capital projects are at the planning stage which will be built in the next 5-10 years at an estimated cost of R12 Billion.

Through our planning processes we have determined that a new dam will be required to service Gauteng by 2019. The feasibility studies to determine the location of this new dam have already been completed and a decision on the location will be made in the coming months.

In addressing the infrastructure challenges, we must distinguish between National water infrastructure and municipal infrastructure. In terms of national infrastructure DWAF is well advanced in developing a comprehensive asset register. Based on it's commitment to ensure effective management, DWAF initiated a study to investigate the condition of its works including dam safety issues. Based on this study, the need was identified to improve the situation which resulted in special funding being allocated to DWAF by National Treasury, to address the National water infrastructure needs. I request members not to confuse dam infrastructure with other forms of infrastructure such as waste water treatment plants.

We have provided information to Parliament on dams that require maintenance to bring them up to international standards. There have been some claims that our water infrastructure is now 'crumbling' – this is most definitely not the case. A plan is in place to do the necessary rehabilitation and refurbishments and in 2006 we set aside R1.3 billion over a five year period to ensure that our dams are maintained and they are in line with international standards. The maintenance programmes has already commenced with repair work on 42 of the dams. South Africa has an excellent record with respect to safety of dams and conducts compulsory safety inspections at regular intervals. The identified shortcomings on DWAF owned dams are being attended to and our important storage dams are all structurally safe and the communities around them need not be concerned.

Honourable members I now turn to the state of our drinking water. Drinking water quality management is the responsibility of municipalities; and the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry, has an oversight and regulatory role on the quality of tap water. Over the past few years my Department has implemented a country-wide system to assist with the overall management of drinking water quality. On average 3000 samples are taken nationwide from water supply systems, and from the latest results available we are pleased to report that more than 94% of the analyses complied with the health aspects of the national standard for drinking water quality. The quality of drinking water from our taps is one of the best in the world and these finding serve as proof that we can still claim our rightful place as one of the countries where one can drink water from the tap.

There are however 6% that do not comply. My Department as part of our oversight responsibility is working with the municipalities in these small towns to ensure that they meet the required standards of delivering safe and clean drinking water to our people. Armed with information from our monitoring system we are able to be proactive in addressing any non-compliance.

Of concern to me is the state of our rivers, as there is pollution in our rivers. I am very concerned about this pollution and have directed my department to strengthen its oversight role so that we address this problem more comprehensively. The pollution can come from the mining industry – what is referred to as 'acid mine drainage'; from poor municipal infrastructure which is not treating the waste water to the required standards before releasing it back into the rivers; as a result of industrial activity; from informal settlements that establish themselves alongside rivers; or from agriculture activities.

As part of our regulatory responsibilities my Department monitors the health of our rivers. All is not well - we have identified 142 high risk sites where there is pollution. Despite what some will have you believe, we are well aware of the pollution in these areas; and together with relevant stakeholders, we see it as a priority to bring them back to good health through our river health programme. More can be done, and we will do more. We will be expanding the capacity of our regulatory and compliance unit, and we will be enforcing what we refer to as 'the polluter pays principle' – meaning that if you pollute you pay the charges related to cleaning up the pollution.

Other important area to address is the municipal waste water treatment plants. The responsibility for the running of the waste water treatment plants rest with municipalities. Here the responsibility of my Department is to play an oversight role. We have done an audit and found that the situation in many municipalities is dire, and must be addressed as a matter of urgency. The pollution in some of our rivers can be directly linked

to failure on the part of these municipal waste water treatment plants, and there is no denying that some of these plants are in poor condition.

From our side we have recognised the need to support the municipalities so that they are able to comply with our guidelines. The following actions are under way and are in addition to the hands on support we already provide to municipalities:

1. An extensive database on all plants is under development.
2. The monitoring system is being extended to also include functionality management, governance, and condition.
3. The initial audit is to be extended to all waste water treatment plants.
4. A special bulk infrastructure fund has been established.
5. A dedicated program on infrastructure planning is under way.
6. Special guidelines have been developed on infrastructure management.
7. An asset management programme has been initiated.
8. Special attention is given to institutional capacity development with the focus on sustainable management – both for the long and short term.
9. Special attention is also given to the regulation of the sector which includes accountability, performance monitoring and legal intervention.
10. Continuous one-on-one intervention is also taking place.

Finally, there is a concern around skills. Like all sectors in this country that require engineers and scientists we face the challenges in recruiting and retaining suitably qualified staff. While we acknowledge more can be done we have put mitigation measures in place to ensure that we do not run into a crisis here. Measures include the use of international experts, the deployment of engineers to municipalities through our regional offices, the establishment of a training academy for young graduates, and we are looking forward to improved compensation by the implementation of a special dispensation allowance for scarce skills occupations such as engineers in collaboration with the Department of Public Service and Administration.

In summary, our drinking water is safe and getting safer; there are concerns about the state of our rivers; there are challenges in municipalities with waste water treatment, which requires urgent attention; our planning is strong; and our dams are safe. Honourable members this is a complex message that requires us to engage meaningfully with water issues; and to remember at all times that we live in a drought region, our water is not unlimited and we must conserve and protect our water.

I thank you.