

**WeedBuster Week 2008 - 'Plant Me Instead'**  
**Speech by Mrs LB Hendricks, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry**  
**Ratanang Sport Centre, Jacobsdal, Free State Province**  
**6 October 2008**

Premier Marshoff  
Mayor of the Xariep DM and Letsemeng Municipality  
Councillors present  
Programme Director  
Ladies and Gentlemen

Goeie Môre, Dumelang, Good morning

A few weeks ago the government launched its War on Poverty programme. That launch took place in this Province and here in Jacobsdal. During the launch 30 households were visited in which there were unemployed individuals. Today I can report to you that through the Working for Water Programme we have been able to assist; and those people are now employed by the programme and are currently undergoing training to start work in November. Not only will these people be employed in the programme for two years, they will also receive accredited operational and business skills training to ensure that they are developed as entrepreneurs at the time of exiting the programme. It is through such efforts and working with initiatives like the Working for Water programme that we are addressing poverty in our country and creating a better life for our people.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we are here today to launch our annual Weedbuster Week campaign, which aims to highlight the challenges we face in trying to manage and contain the spread of invasive alien plants and the work that we are doing in the Working for Water programme to address these challenges as well as create employment opportunities. Invasive alien plants for those that do not know are plants that come from other countries and do not have any natural 'enemies' and are then able to grow unchecked, causing destruction to the environment and consuming too much water.

This year our theme for Weed Buster Week, which takes place from today until 12 October, is '**Plant Me Instead**'. This theme is to create awareness in our country of the need to plant trees and plants that are indigenous to South Africa as they are suited to the environment and require less water. The campaign involves a number of government departments and led by my department, the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry through the *Working for Water* (WfW) programme. It is also supported by a number of partners and stakeholders.

People often forget the importance of nature and the critical role that it can play in helping restore the dignity of this country and its people. I am therefore very pleased to be here today and to celebrate with you, our efforts in protecting and restoring our environment. We frequently overlook our dependence on our natural resources, which is by far the most valuable inheritance that we can leave for future generations. How often do we gather to contemplate the need to repay the favours that our natural environment bestows on us?

It is through our annual Weedbuster Week and similar weeks such as Arbour Week that we step back and remind ourselves or share with members of our communities of the need to protect our environment and take proactive measures to improve the environment.

As a government we are committed to supporting the environment but in doing so we are looking at how communities can benefit from the environment so that we maintain a healthy natural environment while addressing one of the major challenges facing our country, that of poverty and unemployment.

We are achieving this goal through initiatives like the *Working for Water* programme, which has been very successful since it was launched in 1995 in reaching out to the most economically depressed areas of our country, to the rural poor and to those left destitute through the policies of apartheid.

The *Working for Water* programme has been an inspiration to our young democracy. It is steeped in the principles of people-centred reconstruction and development that have been the hallmark of South Africa's democratic government since April 1994. Through the programme we are controlling invasive alien plants with a labour-intensive emphasis so that we create jobs for the unemployed. I would like to congratulate this programme for its success over the past 13 years.

The programme was started in 1995 through a grant of R25 million from the then Reconstruction and Development programme. It has grown over the past 13 years and during the last financial year created 30 210 jobs, cleared 140,000 hectares of new areas and provided almost 550,000 hectares of follow-up

treatment on areas previously cleared. This financial year the programme has a budget of R387 million and we are seeing how this programme is continuing its excellent work and creating thousands of jobs for people across the country. An important aspect of the programme is its work with other government departments in providing training opportunities, with many social interventions.

All of this work has been done without compromising its focus on controlling invasive alien plants. Invasive Alien plants have invaded over 10 million hectares of South Africa and because they multiply so fast, if left unchecked, the problem would double in the next 15 years. Fortunately through the efforts of the Working for Water programme, the communities that they work with and the work of individuals who take responsibility for removing Invasive Alien Plants we will be able to make inroads in addressing this ever present threat to our natural environment.

What cannot be disputed is that invasive alien vegetation represents a real challenge to us in protecting our natural Resources. Enough evidence exist, as was highlighted at a recent symposium where the country's top experts gathered to share the scientific arguments for invasive alien plant clearing in South Africa, that shows us that if we do not deal with the scourge of invasive now, the price we will have to pay in the future will be devastating to our country's development ideals.

Estimates indicate that 7% of our annual water runoff is being guzzled up by invasive alien plants, and what is especially alarming is that this figure will get progressively worse. The negative impacts also do not stop there - others include

- the degradation of our rich biological diversity which underpins our tourism industry,
- the ecological integrity of our natural systems on which we all depend for our livelihoods,
- fire management and the havoc that alien-invasive fuelled wildfires wreak on us from time to time, and
- the productive use of land responsible for keeping the country's food basket stocked.

By far the most powerful tool to deal with the problem of alien invasive plants is through educational and awareness initiatives. Annual events such as Weedbuster Week, present us with an opportunity to unite as custodians of our natural heritage and raise our awareness on this very real challenge to our environment.

Throughout this week we raise awareness so that people are able to identify invasive alien vegetation and how to replace these species with indigenous plants. We are asking them to start their efforts of removing these species and planting indigenous species in their own yards and then extend these efforts to their communities, for example in community parks and gardens. We also tell people that when they come back from other countries not to bring plants and animals from those countries as they might pose a risk to our environment.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Programme Director, the second reason we are here today is to launch the Free State office of the Working for Water programme, which will be based in Bloemfontein. Before April this year the Free State activities of the Working for Water programme was managed through our Northern Cape office. For this financial year Working for Water has a budget of R12 million to clear 11 088 ha of alien species thereby employing 449 people or 48 882 person days of work. The clearing will include the terrestrial projects through out the Province and Water weeds projects along the Vaal river system. In Xhariep District Municipality a total budget of R3 million will be spent this year to clear 560 Hectors and then 3095 hectors of follow up clearing; 324 people will be employed. From the 377 people employed, 106 are women and 96 are youth.

Part of the efforts of the programme will be clearing gum trees from the Vredefort Dome World Heritage site, the red river gums along the Modder River here in Jacobdsal, the red river gum in Hoopstad and the Eastern Free State.

Working for Water together with government departments and the private sector in the province are working together to contribute to the sustainable management and control of Invasive Alien Plants, and to add value to the clearing operations. Initiatives are underway to develop value added industries in the province so that we use the vegetation or biomass that is cleared for business opportunities. In other provinces we have seen the vegetation that is cleared being used to manufacture crafts, furniture, coffins, baskets, pens, and much more. The utilisation of biomass will create additional benefits to local communities for economic empowerment through development of business which could operate independently or as partnerships between public and private sectors.

To conclude, today is almost exactly 13 years since the Working for Water Programme was launched and I am pleased that we have seen this programme being expanded and now has an office in the Free State. If anything the last 13 years have shown us that we must commit more resources to address the problem of

invasive alien plants; we cannot relax this effort. I trust you will carry this message on to your families, friends and colleagues to join together to protect our natural resources. Without this collective effort, we cannot win the battle.

I thank you, Dankie, Ke a leboa