

The Occasion of the Official opening of the Gert Sibande District Laboratory
By Ms Buyelwa Sonjica, MP, Minister of Water and Environmental Affairs
Ermelo
23 JULY 2010

Programme Director
Honourable Minister of Water from the Kingdom of Swaziland and your entourage, HRH, Tsandzile Dlamini
Honourable Premier David Mabuza
Honourable Members of Parliament and the Provincial Legislature
Executive Mayors and Councillors
Board Members and CEO of the Komati Basin Water Authority
Acting Director General and Head of Department and officials present
Chairpersons of the agriculture projects
Distinguished guests
Ladies and gentlemen

I have been entrusted with the singular honour and daunting responsibility or better still, custodianship of the water portfolio in my beloved country by government on behalf of the people of South Africa. This is a responsibility that I do not take lightly and I am keen to carry out to the best of my ability with the support of my compatriots and neighbours.

We know that as a country we still have the responsibility to take water to far flung and previously un-serviced areas. We have a responsibility together to make this a reality. We have this responsibility as per the dictates of the Constitution and the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals that we appended our signature to, as a country. As the President said in the State of the Nation Address after his inauguration in 2009, and I paraphrase: *"For as long as there are communities without clean water, decent shelter or proper sanitation; We shall not rest, and we dare not falter, in our drive to eradicate poverty."* That is a directive that cannot be more direct and ours is to rise to it without fail.

Our government firmly believes in dealing with the challenges facing the country together and jointly to achieve our goals. It is definitely this joint responsibility that makes me appreciate our gathering here. The goal that the District Municipality and Umhlathuze Water set out to achieve is a result of a joint effort embodied in the concept of "public public partnership"

With kind assistance from dedicated players in the water sector, we can definitely make a difference and make the lives of our people better. I am humbled by your presence here today and I appreciate your commitment to make a difference and improve water provision in the country. We as the Department have the interests of our country's water at heart but we also have concern for our neighbours and in this case the Kingdom of Swaziland that lies only 150km from here towards the sea.

We have rivers that run from this district into Swaziland; for example the Inkomati River that is fed from the Vygeboom Dam, the Assegaai River that is fed from the Heyshope Dam and runs into the Mkhondvo River that in turn runs into Swaziland, the Ngwempisi River is fed from the Jerico and Morgenstrond Dams which run though South Africa and again into Swaziland. These are a few of the river schemes that are international rivers that likewise need to be managed as such. We need to have good relations with our neighbouring countries and equitably share water that runs in common international catchments.

Programme Director, it is worth reflecting that the Gert Sibande District Municipality, (which is not only the birthplace but is aptly named after the Lion of the East), is characterised by many complexities. The district municipality is the source of five (5) of our Water Management Areas, namely the Usutu-Mhlatuze, Upper Vaal, Thukela, Olifants and Inkomati WMAs. It also has a number of Bulk Transfer Schemes which include the Usutu Vaal Scheme, Thukela to Vaal River scheme. The municipality has thirteen (13) dams that are utilised by the communities within the district, and it seven (7) major dams that are utilised to support the Eskom Power Stations and mining activities. Moreover, it has in excess of eleven (11) rivers from which water is abstracted for treatment and delivery for public consumption, and it also extracts water from 1100 boreholes to supply a population in the order of one (1) million people.

The Department, for many years, has provided a supportive role to municipalities and recently has had to take on a more compliance monitoring role due to the deterioration of water quality in our rivers and the less than desirable water quality that is being provided to our consumers. We have designed and implemented a number of good systems for which we have received international acclaim e.g. the eWQMS system for the monitoring of water quality throughout the country and some other systems e.g. the Regulatory Performance Measurement System that is currently being rolled out to assist municipalities with the monitoring of service delivery and to advise them of where they can improve.

Although we are taking a more compliance and monitoring stance, DWA is still willing to support municipalities that need it and more especially municipalities that are progressive and actively making a difference in the country and the communities they serve.

Let me take this opportunity to congratulate the Gert Sibande District Municipality on its achievement in establishing this beautiful new water quality testing laboratory. I believe it's an iconic act that needs to be observed and given credit. This project links in very well with the initiatives of the Department to address the water challenges in the area. We want to fully support such initiatives and try and replicate this good work in other municipalities in the country. These types of projects need to be documented as good practice and the information needs to be shared with others as an example of what is possible when people hold hands, amplifying the kind of impact such an establishment can make.

This wonderful initiative will also have a positive impact to programmes such as the Baswa Le Meetse and the South African Water Youth Prize where school children will be given opportunities to tour and do their projects and experiments, which work will assist us in finding innovative means of keeping our drinking and waste water within the acceptable limits. Recently, I was informed of fish that are dying in the Blesbokspruit just outside Bethal. The DWA team is investigating this development, however, preliminary reports are pointing to the Govan Mbeki Sewer works that are discharging non-compliant effluent into the spruit. The Department has issued non-compliant notices to the Municipality. The laboratory will go a long way in assisting Municipalities around to monitor their effluent from time to time to avoid such environmental degradation.

I want to thank everyone who contributed to the establishment of this laboratory. I commend and exhort all the roleplayers to continue with the excellent work.

“WATER IS LIFE”

I THANK YOU!

