



water affairs

Department:  
Water Affairs  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

KEYNOTE ADDRESS DELIVERED BY HONOURABLE DEPUTY MINISTER OF WATER AND ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS, MS REJOICE MABUDAFHASI, MP, DURING THE WORLD WETLANDS DAY CELEBRATIONS AT KAREEDOUW, EASTERN CAPE PROVINCE

FRIDAY, 01 FEBRUARY 2013

Programme Director;  
Executive Mayor of the Cacadu District Municipality, Cllr Khunjuzwa Kekana;  
Mayor of the Koukamma Local Municipality, Cllr Samuel Vuso;  
Mayor of the Kouga Local Municipality, Cllr Booi Koerat;  
Members of the Mayoral Committee;  
Councillor Mfunda representing the Mayor of Nelson Mandela Metro;  
Officials from various departments, municipalities and other institutions  
Educators and Learners from surrounding schools;  
Members of the community;  
Members of the media;  
Ladies and Gentlemen

Molweni

Fellow South Africans, I stand before you here today as we commemorate the 16<sup>th</sup> annual World Wetlands Day which was first celebrated in 1997. This day also marks the anniversary of the signing of the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance at the Iranian City of Ramsar, on 02 February 1971.

The international theme for this year's World Wetlands Day is "**Wetlands and Water Management**" with the slogan "**Wetlands take care of water**".

During the celebrations of World Wetlands Day, we educate communities about the importance of wetlands and the need to protect and conserve them.

We also acknowledge their indigenous knowledge and encourage them to apply it as it is still relevant. It is this indigenous knowledge which conserved our water resources and environment very well in the olden days. Nowadays we discontinued that and say its old fashioned or associate it with illiteracy. Let us tap on the knowledge from the elders in our communities on how they used to conserve natural resources.

Wetlands provide important hydrological functions such as groundwater recharge, water quality improvement and flood alleviation. The health of wetlands depends on the quality and quantity of water that reaches them.

Wetlands are one of our water sources, we need to conserve them by preventing pollution and keep them clean. Wetlands play a key role in naturally improving water quality and offering buffer-zones which can prevent floods, amongst others.

South Africa has limited water resources, government, communities, business, industry and mining sectors– all of us have no choice but to conserve our water source such as rivers, dams, wetlands, springs, underground water, etc.

The United Nations General Assembly declared 2013 as the International Year for Water Cooperation. This decision recognises that water is critical for sustainable development, human health and well-being. This calls for conservation of our wetlands and other sources of water, as Water is a catalyst for socio-economic development. “Without Water there will be no development”

This year, our Department has chosen Kromme River catchment on the basis that it experienced dramatic floods in 2006 which resulted in heavy loss of life and property. In some places the river was gouged down to bedrock level while in others large amounts of sediment were deposited by the receding floodwaters. We are here to evaluate the impact of the interventions we have implemented to address the above mentioned problems.

The Kromme River catchment is a significant water source for the Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan (NMBM). It supplies about 40% of Port Elizabeth’s water, via the

Churchill Dam which is situated on the Kromme River. The Mpofu dam also provides water to the Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan and is also situated on the Kromme River below the Churchill dam.

This catchment previously contained some of the largest wetlands in South Africa. However, it is estimated that about 60% of these valley floor peat basins have been lost over the last century, as a result of invasive alien vegetation such as Black Wattle; as well as poorly designed roads and farming activities in the floodplain.

Despite the above mentioned challenges, the Kromme River still contains several extensive peat deposits, which continue to contribute to the improvement of water quality, attenuation of floods and maintenance of flow in the river.

In 1996 the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry, through the Working for Water Programme, started the extensive eradication of alien invasive vegetation, starting in the upper catchment with the intention of clearing at least as far as the Churchill Dam.

In 2001 the Department of Environmental Affairs through the Working for Wetlands Programme, started rehabilitating wetlands in the Kromme River catchment.

Over the past 11 years, 11 large gabions and concrete structures have been built at a total cost of over R10 million, to combat erosion that threatened the remaining large, intact wetlands.

It is estimated that this work has improved water availability by approximately 32,000 litres of water per day per hectare cleared.

A total of 60 local people from Joubertina and Kareedouw are employed by the Working for Wetlands' projects in the Kromme area and they have also received accredited training focusing on technical, business and life skills.

Farmers are also actively involved in the integrated management of the catchment to ensure that the catchment is looked after in totality. They are involved in rehabilitation projects taking place in the area. This initiative improved the agricultural practices.

I am challenging the community of Koukamma Local Municipality to emulate the Makuleke community in Limpopo which is actively involved in Wetlands preservation and protection. The Makuleke Wetlands has been declared a Ramsar site (Wetland of International Importance) on the 22 of June 2007 and is the first Ramsar site owned and co-managed by the community not only in South Africa but worldwide.

Nationally, Working for Wetlands has invested 530 million Rands in the rehabilitation of 906 wetlands, thereby improving or securing the health of more than 70,000 hectares of wetland area. In the process, the programme has provided 12,848 employment opportunities.

Ladies and gentlemen, although past agricultural practices did not usually take into account the role and functions of wetlands, the conservation and rehabilitation of wetlands on farms in the area has increasingly become a priority to ensure a long-term sustainable water supply.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan Municipality, District and Local Municipalities, Gamtoos Irrigation Board, Communities, Farmers, Working for Water, Working for Living Lands for the sterling work which will enable our country to meet its objectives in this catchment.

We are also in a process of establishing Kromme River Catchment forum that will be composed of all stakeholders and be responsible for management of this catchment.

Let's work together to secure our Wetlands for the sake of biodiversity and water management.

Failure to do so will retard our development as our people will not have access to water, will result in food insecurity, as farmers will not be able to produce food, our ecosystems will not survive, and our tourism will also be affected.

I would like to end with the words of Africa's heroine, an environmentalist and a Nobel Peace Laureate, who lived a selfless life dedicated to the emancipation of women and the protection of the environment, the late Professor Wangari Mathai,

I quote

*"I have seen rivers that were brown with silt become clean-flowing again ... The job is hardly over, but it no longer seems impossible."*

I thank you.