



**MINISTRY OF WATER AND SANITATION
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA**

REMARKS BY DEPUTY MINISTER OF WATER AND SANITATION, SELLO SEITLHOLO AT THE VAAL RIVER ANTI_POLLUTION LAUNCH FORUM

VAAL, GAUTENG

03 OCTOBER 2024

Programme Directors,

Premier

Northern Cape Department of Agriculture, Environmental Affairs, Rural Development and Land Reform, MEC Mase Manopele (Awaiting confirmation)

Mpumalanga Department of Agriculture, Rural Development, Land and Environmental Affairs Acting MEC Makhosazana Masilela

Gauteng Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, MEC Shyla Peters

Executive Mayor of Sedibeng Cllr, Lerato Maloka

Executive Mayor of Metsimaholo Local Municipality Cllr Jack Malindi

Executive Mayor of Magareng Local Municipality Cllr Neo Mase

Executive Mayor of Midvaal Local Municipality Cllr Peter Teixeira

Executive Mayor of Mafube Local Municipality Cllr Tihoare Motsoeneng

Executive Mayor of Ngwathe Local Municipality Cllr Victoria de Beer Mthombeni

Senior officials from the Department of Water and Sanitation and our sister Departments

Chairpersons and Members of Water Boards and Catchment Management Agencies

Members of the media

Ladies and gentlemen:

Programme Directors and colleagues, it gives me great pleasure to be here today for the Launch of the Vaal River Anti-Pollution Forum. It is an important day for the protection of our precious water resources.

Our meeting here today is a watershed moment for our country's water resources. We must decide today, at this Launch, if we are the leaders who will meet the moment to protect our precious water resources, for future generations.

Indeed colleagues, we must decide here today whether we will be the ones who will be remembered for directing the course of every river and every stream to a sustainable future of access to clean and safe water for all.

The pollution of our water resources remains one of the greatest risks that faces our water security and sustainability, and I am here to sound the alarm. Like the captain of a ship on a rough course at sea, I am here to sound the "blasts". I am here to say, this is our moment to act and act decisively against the pollution and contamination of our water resources or we will face a disaster of titanic proportions.

Programme directors, let me start my reflection by highlighting the significance of the river for which we have converged here today, the Vaal River.

The Vaal River is often described as the hardest working river in South Africa. It is the second largest river in South Africa, after the Orange River, into which it flows. The 1200 km-long river crosses a number of provinces, namely Mpumalanga (where it originates near Ermelo) Gauteng, the Free State, and the Northern Cape.

Large dams, including Grootdraai, the Vaal and Bloemhof dams are constructed on the river to ensure a steady water supply to citizens of these provinces and the industries dependent on water from the river.

The Vaal dam is the most important dam in the country because of its role as the primary supplier of water to the economic heartland of South Africa. The industrial areas it supplies produce more than 50% of South Africa's wealth as well as more than 80% of the country's electricity requirements. From the Vaal River, water is also supplied to some of the largest gold and platinum mines.

These dams including the Vaal Barrage are also used by many for recreational, tourism and hospitality activities.

Colleagues, this tells us something important. It tells us that not only is the Vaal River and its dams crucial for millions of lives of South Africans but it is vital for the life of our country's economy. It is vital for millions of jobs and livelihoods. If we were to lose this river system to unmitigated and rampant pollution, we would lose millions of livelihoods and lives.

I am therefore sounding the alarm. This is a crucial moment for the future of this precious water resource.

The Vaal River, due to its extent and the development sectors it supports receives a huge volume of pollution from urban developments, both formal and informal settlements, wastewater treatment works, runoff from mines, agriculture and discharge of treated wastewater from industries.

The water quality in the river has declined over time and in some instances had led at the Barrage in excessive growth of Water Lettuce and Hyacinth.

Such an outbreak occurred around this time last year in the Barrage and with enormous support from the community the water lettuce and hyacinth were physically removed and chemically treated under the leadership of Rand Water.

It is for this important reason that we are gathered here today for the launch of the Vaal River Anti-Pollution Forum. It is an important moment. We are here to say the issue of pollution of our water resources is the business of every South African and every industry. The Forum must play a crucial role in ensuring that stakeholders are constantly around the table to chart solutions towards fighting pollution of the Vaal River.

In April of this year the former Minister Senzo Mchunu whilst visiting the Barrage pronounced on the establishment of the Forum we are here to launch today.

The main objective of the Forum will be to co-ordinate, improve and integrate efforts for the management of the Vaal River quality in line with its determined Resource Quality Objectives (RQOs). This will be done through addressing risks elevated by the 16 Catchment Management Forums (CMFs).

Currently, there are 16 sub-catchment forums (10 in the Upper Vaal, 4 in the Middle Vaal and 2 in the Lower Vaal). They will continue to operate as normal but will escalate systemic challenges that cannot be resolved within these sub-catchments to the Forum.

The Forum through task teams will investigate and make recommendations on short-medium- and long-term actions that must be taken to improve the performance of the smaller forums and to elevate and effect any systematic actions in improving the water quality status in the Vaal, linked to the Catchment Management Strategy for Vaal Orange CMA and the larger national water quality strategy to synchronize role player actions.

Through regular reporting the Chairperson and Vice chairperson of VOCMA will report on activities to also ensure effective feedback linkages between the overarching Forum, the sub-catchment forums, the Vaal Orange Catchment Management, as local implementer, and the DWS, as the regulator.

Though the Department will continue, with the Vaal Orange Catchment Management Agency, to control these species, the causes of water quality deterioration need to be addressed in collaboration with the sectors that benefit from the river.

In order to facilitate input from various stakeholders, sectors and organisations it was also thought prudent to appoint a dedicated Chairperson for the Vaal River Anti-Pollution Forum, which will meet on a quarterly basis.

Nominations for the chairperson were considered and Minister Mchunu agreed to appoint Mr Marius Keet. Mr Keet has over four decades of experience notably before his retirement at the Department of Water and Sanitation as the Chief Director in mine water management and as Director for the Highveld Region managing water quality in

the Komati, Crocodile East, Sabie and Upper Vaal Catchment. He also played a critical role in implementing the National Water Act through the establishment of the 10 water quality forums in the Upper Vaal area. We are therefore confident that this mammoth responsibility of leading this important Forum is in capable hands.

Colleagues, although the Forum will play a crucial role in the management and prevention of pollution of the Vaal River, we must continue to work together and work conscientiously as Departments that play a pivotal role in the management and prevention of pollution of our water resources.

I therefore wish to acknowledge the sister Departments of Human Settlements, Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, Agriculture and Environmental Affairs and the role they play in land use management and welcome their participation in ensuring sustainable development to avoid over-capacitated wastewater treatment works, addressing point source pollution through municipal wastewater and non-point pollution.

The Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environmental Affairs of course also playing a role in the management of biodiversity and the control of alien invasive species.

Colleagues, the other significant truth we must speak today is that these Departments and the Forum can do everything in their power to turn the tide against water pollution.

However, we will still not win this fight if the governance crisis of municipalities in our country is not addressed. Without dealing with this existential crisis, our country may not succeed in this fight. We cannot allow failing municipal water infrastructure to lead to the pollution of water sources to a degree where water sources become unusable. We cannot allow failing municipal water infrastructure to cripple our country.

Municipalities must work, for our country to work. Their wastewater treatment works must improve their functionality and municipalities must know the impact their discharge of pollutants, such as untreated sewerage, has on the water security of our country.

Whilst we call for improved local government for the betterment of our water systems, we must equally play a firm role in advancing our regulatory mandate.

Colleagues, whilst cooperative governance and intergovernmental relations are the cornerstone of our democratic architecture, we must apply the laws of this country firmly to municipalities, to protect our precious water resources.

We cannot and must not play softball with municipalities at the costs of lives and livelihoods.

Likewise, whilst we call for public-private partnerships in our quest to fight the pollution of our water resources, we must apply the law firmly to industries who are polluting our water resources.

The private sector and business must play their role in safeguarding the water resources they rely upon to grow our economy and create jobs. They must play an active role in eliminating pollution. They must also play their role in sounding the alarm

where pollution of water resources occurs by other role players. We will be ready and responsive as a Department to those alarms.

It is for that reason, for instance, I will be doing an oversight visit in Springfontein in the Free State. The agricultural sector has sounded an alarm on the impact water pollution is having on agricultural activities, and we are responding.

That is the spirit in which I plead we approach this Forum, a spirit that says the pollution of water resources is the responsibility of everyone. Access to clean and safe water must be the cause for championing of everyone. South Africans must take charge in the safeguarding of our precious water resources. They must refrain from polluting our water sources and they must report those who do so.

The alarm must ring in the mind of every South African that water is a resource that cannot be replaced. Water is a resource that cannot be replaced. Water is a resource that cannot be replaced. We must therefore guard it precious.

Programme directors and colleagues, I will not only be sounding the alarm on the pollution of our water resources, but I will be dedicated in ensuring that throughout the length and breadth of our country – there is access to clean and safe water for all. Clean and safe water for homes. Clean and safe water for businesses and industries.

There are a number of crucial things we will do in order to realise this vision:

- Dedicated channels for stakeholders and the public to participate in reporting pollution, such as dedicated reporting desks
- A people-centred national campaign on water anti-pollution
- National Polluters Register
- Strengthened regulatory, compliance and enforcement capacity
- Dedicated Green investigative units and tribunals

The work of protecting our water resources from pollution is an important task. It is for this reason colleagues, that we are happy to be here to launch the Vaal River Anti-Pollution Forum.

I will monitor its work closely and I will dedicate all the time I can to ensure that it will be an effective Forum that will achieve the vision of ensuring that the water quality of the Vaal River system is improved and there is clean and safe water for all.

It is also my hope that through the successes and lessons of the Forum, we may be able to replicate this work throughout the country.

I therefore wish to take this opportunity to wish the Forum all the best in the work they will be doing, and I call on every South African and every organisation to make the issue of water pollution their issue.

I thank you.