

**SPEECH BY MR RONNIE KASRILS, MP**  
**MINISTER OF WATER AFFAIRS AND FORESTRY**  
**AT THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE BOREHOLE WATER**  
**ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHERN AFRICA**  
**THURSDAY 25 MAY 2000**

Honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen

It is a great pleasure to address you on the eve of your Annual General Meeting. I am aware of the vital role your Association plays in the groundwater industry in South Africa and am very happy to have this opportunity to meet you all.

As you may know, I recently addressed the Annual General Meeting of the Drilling Contractors Association of SA. There I called for stronger ties with my Department. I do so again here. We will need to strengthen our partnership as we face the challenges of implementing new legislation. With so many goals and objectives in common, I am optimistic that we can look forward to a mutually beneficial relationship.

The devastating floods and their aftermath have provided a sharp reminder of the unreliability of our rainfall and weather patterns, and thus the precariousness of our water supplies. Although much of the country suffers from serious water shortages and drought, our recent experience reminds us just how violently our weather can swing from one extreme to the other. As the farmers say, 'if the drought doesn't get you, the floods will.'

And, of course, floods like these do not really help us to deal with drought. We cannot create instant storage for water in those quantities. And, like the Ancient

Mariner in the poem by the British poet, Coleridge, many of our people were faced with “water, water everywhere but not a drop to drink”.

There was, of course, a silver lining to all those rain clouds. The heavy rains have done much to recharge the groundwater that was so badly depleted by the droughts of the eighties and early nineties.

Thankfully, in South Africa we have a large percentage of ground water to augment the surface water from our rivers and dams, even though we do not have as much as we would like and it is not always of the best quality. This makes finding adequate ground water supplies a particular challenge. It is a challenge I quite feel sure we can meet. We can be proud of our excellence in the art and science of finding and drilling for underground water. With skill and expertise matched by the development of equipment and technology, we are well set to compete in the global marketplace.

The National Water Act of 1998 regards groundwater as an integral part of the hydrological cycle, providing the essential baseflow recharge to all our rivers and streams. Groundwater is no longer privately owned – its use is authorised only if beneficial, in the public interest and if it is environmentally sustainable. This means that unscrupulous practices that mine groundwater sources until they are dry cannot be considered lawful.

These controls are important, because they enables us to make informed and careful decisions about how, where and when we use this valuable resource for the benefit of all South Africans.

The President of the Constitutional Court, Judge Chaskalson, said last week that some of the most important rights the Constitution guarantees are socio-economic rights. How, he asked, can people live in dignity if they do not have access to the basic necessities of life? And, of course, quality of life depends, amongst other essentials, on a clean and safe water supply.

Yet it is still a reality that large numbers of South Africans do not have access to clean and safe water to drink. In many communities, people are still forced to carry the water they need over long distances. Usually it is the women and children who perform this daily chore.

As the responsible Minister, my task is to make sure that we fulfil our commitment of providing 25 litres per person per day within 200 metres of the household. This is not a dream, nor is it an irresponsible electioneering promise. It must happen. And we must explore every avenue to ensure that it happens within the foreseeable future.

Groundwater can play an extremely important role in this respect, particularly in delivering water to dispersed rural communities. As a reliable and relatively accessible resource, it is particularly appropriate in arid areas that are prone to drought and where the surface waters dry up for months at a time. For example, we estimate the potential of groundwater for domestic use in the Eastern Cape as over 80%, in comparison to a present estimated use of 25% across all communities. If present trends in water supply statistics continue, we can expect to see widespread reliance on groundwater in the years ahead.

South Africa is not alone in its realisation of the value of groundwater. There is growing international recognition that groundwater is a fundamental component of

freshwater resources. Groundwater is increasingly used to supplement surface water where supplies are unreliable. It is often safer to drink untreated. It may, therefore, be regarded as a key factor in local development and poverty alleviation.

That is why the theme for World Water Day was “Groundwater – the invisible resource”.

It is estimated that nearly half of the world’s population depends on groundwater sources for drinking water supply. Closer to home, our northern neighbour Zimbabwe relies on groundwater for approximately 70% of its water supply.

A successful local example of groundwater development is in the Eastern Cape, where the El Nino Mitigation Project allocated a total of R36 million to water supply projects. More than 50% of this allocation in the Eastern Cape was spent on groundwater projects. The most heartening thing about this programme is that, of about 46 diesel powered borehole schemes implemented, a year later 44 were still running. In view of the poor total cost recovery of many of community schemes, this is a major achievement.

In order to quantify where and how much groundwater is being used, we have begun a process of national registration of water use. Not all water use must be registered – for example it is not necessary to register taking of water for household use. However, significant water use must be registered – such as that used for commercial purposes, as for the irrigation of commercial crops. With this information, we can start to plan more effectively, and to ensure the apportioning of limited water is done fairly and equitably.

As a long-time partner with my Department, the Borehole Water Association has a clear role to play in this important work. Registration is publicised in the Government Gazette and local media. But your members interact directly with the water user and, as we know, the best form of communication – and explanation – is by word of mouth. I appeal to you to help us with our registration drive.

We are also considering regulations for the registration of new boreholes to ensure that the information on boreholes will reach the National Groundwater Data Base. Such an undertaking, given that some 100 000 boreholes are drilled annually, will be virtually impossible without the constructive participation of your Association and the drilling industry as a whole.

Closely linked to the registration of boreholes is the possible registration of drillers, a suggestion made by your Association as well as the Drilling Contractors Association. My Department has advocated a voluntary process in which your industry expands its membership and demonstrates that you are willing to set and meet standards in service delivery. We are willing to consider a joint working group on this and related matters.

There are other ways in which you can help promote the equitable use of ground water. You have the expertise to develop appropriate technologies, training and the transfer of skills to assist people on the ground in the management and maintenance of their water services. You have the means to help us distribute the material we have prepared on pollution prevention and sustainable use. You are, in other words, our link on the ground and, as such, can play a significant role in promoting broader access to information, skills and technologies.

Groundwater development presents an important opportunity for economic growth. The siting, drilling, equipping and maintaining of some 100 000 new boreholes every year requires major inputs from a number of related industries at national, provincial and the local level. The groundwater industry is growing, and as our limited freshwater resources are already under pressure to meet the demand, it will no doubt continue to grow, both in South Africa and throughout our region.

It is clear that national government cannot shoulder the responsibility for all the objectives of the National Water Act alone. The Act is in the interest of all South Africans and crucial to the health and well-being of our future generations. We all have a responsibility to do what we can to achieve its goals.

We may have different points of departure – different needs and expectations, but our objectives should be the same: to ensure a stable water resource base for sustainable utilisation, sustainable economic and social development.

I wish to assure you of my and my Department's willingness to work with you and all role players in the ground water industry to improve the protection and sustained delivery of this precious resource to our people. I hope we may look forward to continued co-operation at all levels – within your sector, with government and with the public at large.

Let me conclude by wishing you success in your endeavours tomorrow and in the future.