

**ADDRESS BY THE MINISTER OF WATER AFFAIRS
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AT THE LAUNCH OF THE MIDRAND WATER CONSERVATION AND WATER
DEMAND MANAGEMENT STRATEGY
COUNCIL CHAMBERS, MIDRAND
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Mayor Mahlangu, Members of the Council, members of the community, friends

On Wednesday this week, the President and members of the Cabinet joined me at in Bridgetown, Athlone where we participated in the clean-up of the Vygeskraal River that runs through Athlone. Wednesday was the launch of Water Week 2000. On Monday 24, to mark the end of Water Week, the President will again roll up his sleeves and fix a leaking tap not far from here in Midrand.

I tell you this to demonstrate how very seriously our government, from the President himself, takes the issue of water management and conservation in South Africa. The purpose of Water Week is to highlight the critical role water plays in our lives – in the slogan of this year's Water Week, "Everything works with water. Let's all work for water". We have tried to plan our events and awareness campaigns in such a way as to draw maximum attention to the problems our country faces and to point to solutions that will help us navigate the future. Water Week is not, after all, just a date on our calendar. It is the expression of a philosophy that should guide and inform the way we use water ... every day of the year.

A few days ago, in an article in The Star, one of the organisers of the World Water Forum, argued that water should not be the business of government but of the private sector. The reality is, of course, that the management and delivery of water cannot be left to the private sector. It is the central business of government – at national, provincial and local levels – to ensure that the people of this country have access to this most basic of resources. And we must be realistic. It is the very nature of business to seek projects that make profits and water

profits are to be found in the privileged areas of our country, not amongst the poorest of the poor. To abdicate the management of water to the private sector would be to abandon those who most government's help to access a better life.

The World Water Forum, which begins in the Netherlands this weekend, offers us an important opportunity to influence international policy on water security. I will be participating in the Forum and am part of the SADC Ministers' group which will attend a world water sector's ministerial meeting on Tuesday and Wednesday next week. The countries taking part in this meeting will work with the World Water Council and the Global Water Partnership to bring a common vision to the issue of water security on our planet. SADC plans to make a unique contribution. We are convinced that we have an important role to play in this crucial discussion.

I wish to assure our people that I will be a strong advocate at the Forum of the need for state involvement, particularly in developing countries, to ensure the development of infrastructure in the water sector and social equity with regard to water pricing. I have said, on a number of occasions, that I believe that a basic 25 litres of water should be provided per capita free, so that the poorest of our people are not denied access to this vital life-giving resource.

These kinds of social adjustments cannot be achieved if we leave water management to the private sector.

Having said this, I want to stress that my government is committed to working in close partnership with the private sector and, of course, with communities themselves. We are, indeed, already involved in a number of such partnerships. Of course, the central thing about partnerships is that they are founded on common interests. They involve some give and take; compromises sometimes. But the benefits can be very great because, through partnerships,

we can engage civil society in the process of building the better life on which our future as a country depends.

Midrand has really done a great job in Water Week and I want to congratulate you for your participation and commitment. I am extremely pleased to be with you here today to launch your Water Conservation strategy and to celebrate water week with the Council and community. I hope that the enthusiasm we have seen here will be taken up in local authorities all over the country. You have certainly set a fine example.

Our goal, as government at all levels, must be to provide clean sustainable water to all the people of South Africa in an equitable manner. As we all know, there are some who have as much and more water than they need. And there are others who must walk miles each day to access the water they require. Some of us are confident that our water supply is clean and drinkable. Others, in their desperation, take risks with polluted and contaminated water. The recent floods have exacerbated this situation. It is the great irony of the kind of violent flooding we experience in this country that it leads to less water, not more. In the words of the English poet Coleridge whose poem "The Ancient Mariner" describes the horror of being trapped on a sailing ship on a windless sea: "Water, water everywhere. Nor any drop to drink".

The reality is, of course, that the current high water levels in the dams and the floods do nothing to change the need for water conservation and water demand management. It is physically and economically impossible to store all the water from 100 or 50-year floods. Most of the excess water from the floods will be lost and our available water resources continue to be related to the average long-term yield from the existing dams.

There is, however, a silver lining to the rain clouds that have overshadowed our region over the past weeks. In certain areas, the floods have considerably recharged the underground water levels that had become so depleted in recent years.

These terrible and destructive floods underline the importance of working towards water conservation in our region. They highlight the timeous and critical need for SADC's engagement at the World Water Forum. Our problems – long droughts, fluctuating weather patterns and the devastating effect of the rains – are problems we share with our neighbours in the region. Floods know no national boundaries. The loss of human life and property affects us all. Thus, while we work for water conservation and management in our country, we need to move towards a common approach with our brothers and sisters in the SADC region. Nothing must be allowed to distract us from that.

At home, we are committed to ensuring the implementation of water conservation and water demand management throughout South Africa, involving all consumers and water institutions. To achieve this, we have devised a balance between incentives, support and regulatory measures. The water conservation directorate of the department is currently developing model Water Conservation and Water Demand Management strategies and guidelines to assist local authorities. These include tools on how to manage the distribution system effectively and how to implement consumer demand management initiatives.

The Water Services Act and the National Water Act have changed the role of the Department significantly. Historically, the focus of the Department of Water Affairs was on the development and protection of water resources. There was a strong focus on building dams in order to ensure that farmers received cheap and plentiful supplies of water for irrigation purposes. The advent of our new democracy has changed all that. The Department's role can now be divided into three components:

- First, the Department acts as a regulator of the water industry to ensure the best interests of the entire population and the environment. As custodian of the two new Water Acts, the Department's regulatory functions extend to both Water Services and Water Resources. Our priority is to ensure that all South Africans have access to basic water services, and to ensure adequate water in our rivers to protect the aquatic eco-systems.
- Second, the Department must work to ensure the availability and sustainability of water resources. This does not mean the continuous development of new dams and transfer schemes. On the contrary, we recognise that the only way to ensure the long-term sustainability of water availability is through Water Conservation. Our water resources are limited and the demand is always growing. It is for this reason that we advocate the development of a new water resource planning protocol, placing Water Conservation and Water Demand Management firmly amongst our priorities in water resource planning.
- Our third role is to assist local authorities to ensure the delivery of water services. Because we recognise the institutional and financial constraints of some local authorities, we are directly involved in a number of projects to provide water services to millions of people, particularly in poor rural and peri-urban areas.

The need for water conservation and water control management also includes the challenge of achieving economic and sustainable water services. By reducing wastage and avoiding the premature development of bulk capital infrastructure such as dams, we can significantly reduce the cost of water services. We should remember that it costs a great deal of money to process and transport the clean potable water that is available from our taps. By practicing water conservation, we save money, protect our environment and ensure the long-term sustainability of water supply.

In Gauteng, there are indications that we may need to build another transfer scheme soon unless the demand is reduced significantly. The economic cost of such a scheme could be as

high as R9 billion. The environmental and social costs are incalculable. To this we must add the cost of all bulk infrastructure and the operating costs of treating and delivering water. It is estimated that, in Gauteng, the cost of additional infrastructure for the waste water systems will be more than R 15 billion over the next twenty years.

We should consider, before embarking on such costly schemes, exactly how much water is actually wasted. It is worth noting that, in this area, an estimated 25 % of the water supplied is lost through reticulation and plumbing leaks, as well as simple wastage when people leave taps running continuously. This means that one quarter of our water supply is running uselessly into the ground.

Poor maintenance of underground pipes also contributes to wastage, particularly in former black townships where maintenance has been neglected for years. Homes in urban townships are usually fitted with one toilet and one tap and in many instances are shared by more than 20 people. Before 1994, these homes belonged to the Councils and not to the tenants. For years, councils had failed to maintain and repair water infrastructure, with the result that up to 50% of homes in certain areas have major plumbing leaks.

Another problem relates to the way water is used. It is estimated that a further amount of between 20% to 25% of Gauteng water is used inefficiently. For example, many people, companies and even some municipalities water their lawns and their gardens during the hottest hours of the day when over 50% of the water evaporates. Public education is essential to stop this kind of wastage.

All this means that there are big savings to be made and we should do all we can to regain control of vast amounts of wasted water.

Our government has recognized that one of the key cornerstones to ensure a prosperous South Africa is the efficiency of existing resources and infrastructure. We have inherited a

number of inefficiencies in the water supply industry and are now faced with the challenge of optimising our resources and existing infrastructure in order to ensure social equity and prosperity for all South Africans.

Reviewing Midrand's Water Conservation Strategy, we are very pleased to see how closely it follows the draft Water Conservation and Demand and Management Strategy developed by the Department. The success of the strategy will depend on a number of factors. The most important of these is a full commitment and recognition by all key role players that this is not just another programme, but a fundamentally new philosophy and approach.

This means the strategy should be integrated into all aspects and functions relating to water supply. Every council employee and official, every planner and financial administrator and every member of the community should incorporate it in their daily lives. This makes the kind of awareness-raising we have been engaged in during Water Week particularly pertinent.

Our new water management policy recognizes the importance of being proactive in ensuring sustainable and efficient water services. Water Conservation and Water Demand Management is not about restrictive and punitive measures. Rather, it is about identifying and implementing the best possible options in the interest of society. The key to the strategy is to develop a win – win situation for the environment, community and the Council. Its success will depend on the development of sound relationships between the consumer and the authority and must be based on the principles of equity, accountability and responsibility.

Finally, I would like to say a few words about pollution and its effect on our water supply. We began this Water Week at the Vygeskraal river in Cape Town. We were disgusted by what we took out of that river. And yet, compared to the Jukskei River, that Athlone stream is relatively clean. Population density in this province, particularly in Johannesburg and

Midrand, makes this one of the most polluted areas in our country. This pollution is poisoning our water courses and ground water.

There are, as we all know, numerous sources of pollution. However, although littering and other irresponsible behaviour by individuals is of great concern, the biggest culprit is industry. Large companies and corporations that pollute our environment must be made to adopt better practices. Our national Water Act is designed to tackle this problem.

I have just come from visiting the waste disposal/landfill site called Nkya Sands near Randburg that Mr Tony Leon drew attention to in the past day or so. I must say, after the furore he has been creating in the press, I imagined that I would be faced with something really horrific. What I found was no worse than the kind of rubbish tip you might see outside any town or city anywhere.

I have also been informed that this tip has already been scaled down and will, in fact, be closed in June this year. An alternative site is being developed at Diepsloot.

I would like to point out to Mr Leon that, in his zealous attempts to find fault, he should be careful not to create false trails and waste valuable time and taxpayers' money. Did he really expect to smell roses and nectar at a rubbish dump? I postponed two major meetings and pulled numbers of officials out of their ordinary work to conduct an emergency on-site inspection in response to his complaint. It turned out to be an absolute red herring. This is not an efficient use of government time as he himself should be the first to acknowledge.

The development of the water conservation and water management strategy is just the beginning. The real challenge lies in its implementation. President Mbeki has said that South Africa's current focus and challenge must be the successful implementation of the policies developed over the past few years. That implementation must take place within a framework

of partnerships – between the private and public sector, between the different levels of government and with our communities.

My office and Department are fully committed to working in partnership with your Council and to giving you all the support you may require. We wish you the Council and the community of Midrand all the success in your endeavors. We will be observing your progress with eagerness and interest. And we look forward to holding you up as model and shining example to other local authorities in South Africa.

I thank you.