

ADDRESS BY
THE MINISTER OF WATER AFFAIRS AND FORESTRY
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National Water Week Celebrations
Midrand
17th March 2000

Your Worship the Mayor, ladies, gentlemen, friends and children.

To celebrate Water Week in the light of the recent tragic floods, might well be seen as ironic. As we meet here today, upward of a million of our people are recovering from the devastation – from Alexandra Township to the Northern Province and Mpumalanga.

In Mozambique, the situation is nothing short of catastrophic. Countless hundreds have already drowned. Cities and towns lie under water. The spectacular economic recovery of our neighbour has been set back by years. As you know, our President has made a call for a cancellation of Mozambique's foreign debt so that they can begin reconstructing their country.

These tragic events make it hard to approach Water Week in a light-hearted way. It would have been pleasant to have celebrated the life-giving qualities of water, its purity and tranquillity, rather than being stunned and saddened by its awesome powers of destruction.

However, we must be clear that the tragedy of the floods in no way lessens the relevance of Water Week. In fact, it highlights its significance and underlines

the lessons we need to learn about water. Water Week is about the importance of water and our dependence on it. It is about our need to understand and respect water. It is about how we must conserve and manage water so that it serves our needs, sustains life, benefits all our people and develops our economy.

As both floods and droughts show, none of this is possible unless we have water security in our country. That old farmers' proverb: "if the drought doesn't get you, then the floods will" confirms the fact that our climate has a tendency to fluctuate violently. Although often we have far too little rain, there are time when we have far too much.

And ironically, too much rain may lead to too little water. In many areas, the floods have destroyed and damaged our water infrastructure. This will have to be repaired before proper water services can be restored. So, while people may appear to be surrounded in water, swept away by water, we should remember that they may not have a single clean and unpolluted drop to drink. Like the Ancient Mariner in the old poem by Coleridge whose ship remained motionless for weeks on a windless sea, many of the people of our region gaze with despair at "Water, water everywhere. Nor any drop to drink".

The vagaries of our climate present us with particularly severe challenges. Water Week helps us focus on these.

South Africa is a water scarce country. Our average yearly rainfall is less than 600mm, making us one of the driest countries in the world. Internationally, we

are classified as a water-stressed country, with average per capita water of under 1700 cubic metres.

Our low average rainfalls are exacerbated not only by seasonal and geographic variations and extremes, but also by high rates of evaporation. In many parts of the country, in fact, our evaporation rates are much higher than our rainfall rates. This is compounded by irresponsible behaviour, such as watering during the hottest hours of the day, which may result in an evaporation rate of up to 50% in certain areas.

In South Africa, we also lack the large, flowing rivers and huge underground reservoirs some other countries are blessed with. For example, the Orange River, our largest river, carries less than 10% of the water in the Zambezi.

We also have limited options in respect of our water resources. Already we use over half of what is available. Harnessing the rest becomes increasingly difficult and expensive. Our total annual surface run-off averages about 50 billion cubic metres. Of this, 41 per cent is already used in various ways. A further 13 billion cubic metres per annum could be made available, mainly by constructing more large dams. However, the remaining 33 per cent is lost to evaporation and flood spillage. Some have suggested that we should be building dams to capture the copious floodwaters. This is not, however, an economically viable option.

I would like to mention though, that some good has emerged from the recent disasters. The underground water levels (what is called groundwater) have been recharged in areas where heavy rain has fallen. This is particularly valuable in

areas where groundwater is an important source of water and where groundwater use, such as boreholes, has lowered levels over time.

The slogan for Water Week 2000 is "Everything works with water; let's all work for water".

Despite our water scarcity, we still have enough water for our economic growth and development – enough to meet our goals of a better life for all our people. So we can still say that "everything works with water".

All jobs, be they in industry, in commerce, in agriculture or in tourism are in some way dependent on water. The generation of electricity, so central to a modern economy, is reliant on water.

People depend on water for life. This also does not need emphasising. I have spoken frequently of the hardship experienced by people who walk miles each day to fetch water for drinking and washing; of people who irrigate their crops with containers carried on their heads from the nearest water source. We know too of people whose only water supplies are polluted and unsuitable for drinking. Clean, ready water is a basic requirement for society. We cannot do without it.

All this – a growing economy, a needy and increasing population, expanded access to water supplies and our increasing environmental obligations – means we need more water, *not less*. Yet, unless we continue to work at good water

management, *less* is where we are heading at the moment. It is clear that we can expect even greater demands on our already stressed water resources.

This illustrates the urgency of the second half of the Water Week 200 message – "Let's all work for water".

How do we go about this?

1 We must preserve and look after the catchment areas, the sources of our rivers, and the streams and rivers themselves in order to optimise the flow of water. Many of these natural resources areas are vulnerable to degradation and abuse. With proper management, they can benefit us now and in the future.

2 We must combat pollution and keep our water as pure and clean as possible. Pollution does not happen by itself. In each case, some person or body is responsible. If we can change their behaviour; if we can change the way they engage with the environment, we can do much to help safeguard our water supplies.

3 We must increase the supply and access of water to our people, particularly in rural areas. Despite the considerable progress made since 1994, with new or expanded water services now benefiting 9 million people, there is still much work to be done.

4 We need to conserve and save water. This means introducing savings at all levels and considering new strategies to reduce waste and excess use. It also means building awareness about water scarcity.

All this implies, in words of our overall message for Water Week 2000, that "Water is the key to development, both present and future."

The purpose of Water Week 2000 is to highlight the various problems and needs we face in respect of water in South Africa ... and to bring them into sharp public focus.

I am very happy to be able to tell you that, despite their busy schedules, the President and the Cabinet have taken up the campaign with great enthusiasm. Amongst other things:

On 15 March, as you may have seen on television, the President and Cabinet joined in a clean-up of the Vygeskraal River in Bridgetown, Athlone.

On the 24 March, two major events are planned. In the morning, there will be a Water Festival for young people at the Vaal Dam. In the afternoon, the "President Plumber" (as he has called himself!) and I will be involved in the serious business of fixing leaking taps at a venue to be announced in Midrand.

The 25 March is hacking day and I will be leading a party of stakeholders to take part in the hacking of alien vegetation on the slopes of Table Mountain.

The devastating fires we recently experienced in the Cape underline the importance and relevance of building awareness in this area.

Tonight, I will be flying to the Netherlands to participate in the World Water Forum, where the SADC countries hope to make a significant contribution to the discussions. This presents us with an extremely important opportunity to highlight the problems and challenges of our region.

As you can see, I will be getting quite a lot of exercise in March! But I hope that our efforts will result in many more activities of this kind. Regional events like this one are taking place throughout the country – led by the Premiers and local community leadership. In the Northern Province and Mpumalanga, the focus will be on repairing the damage in wake of the floods.

There will also be a competition for children and other ways for people to participate in Water Week 2000.

To ensure maximum focus on Water Week, my Department has developed an extensive awareness campaign that is running in the media and elsewhere, including radio, television and the press.

Everywhere the response has been wonderful.

Our Patrons have also responded warmly to the campaign. They include His Majesty, King Goodwill Zwelethini, Her Majesty, The Rain Queen, Modjadji,

His Grace, Archbishop Njongunkulu Ndungane and Nobel Prize Winner Ms Nadine Gordimer.

I would also like to say a special thank you to our sponsors. Eskom is the corporate sponsor for Water Week this year and deserves special thanks. And we must also thank Pick 'n Pay, Radio Active, Adrenalin Airtime Marketing, Action Stations and the Water Boards for their generous sponsorship. Thanks also go to NOCSA and the various government departments for their support.

I would also like to thank National Water Week Steering Committee, which includes a remarkable mix of public and private sector and demonstrates our earnestness and determination to build significant partnerships on issues of national significance.

Water Week cannot just be another event on the calendar; a week when we all run around doing interesting things with water. Water Week must make a substantial contribution to changing the way we all think about water; the way we all use water, and the way we value and conserve this most essential of our national resources.

I would like to call on you all here today ... and indeed on all South Africans ... to think of some way in which they can contribute to Water Week 2000. Formally and informally; publicly and in private; in their homes, in their schools, in their offices and workplaces and as communities.

Every effort, great or small, can make a difference. Water conservation and management must become part of the way we think and act in our daily lives. Turn off a tap. Fix a plumbing leak. Clean a river. Water your garden in the evening. Campaign against pollution. Tell your families, friends and communities about water conservation. Let's work for our water!

The floods have given us a wake-up call. Now it is time for all of us to reach out and mobilise action around water.

I would like to end by asking you all to join me in chanting this little poem that expresses the philosophy of Water Week 2000.

Turn off the tap
Don't let it leak
Save every drop
It's Water Week!

South Africa has
made a call
Let's build a better life
For all!

Let's save our water
Clean our streams
Let's work together
As a team
Viva water, pure and clean!