

**ADDRESS BY
THE MINISTER OF WATER AFFAIRS AND FORESTRY
RONNIE KASRILS
AT THE MEDIA LAUNCH OF WATER WEEK 2000
Johannesburg Zoo
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The celebration of Water Week, from 15 – 26 March, might appear to be an extreme irony. Floodwaters have engulfed our northern provinces, Zimbabwe and Mozambique. 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. Tens of thousands of lives are still under threat as floodwaters continue to rise. We have all watched in horror the pitiful scenes of people clinging to the tops of trees and rooftops, waiting and hoping for rescue.

It would have been pleasant to have approached Water Week in a light-hearted way – to have celebrated the life-giving qualities of water, its purity and tranquillity, rather than being stunned by its awesome powers of destruction.

Yet, we can be very clear that the tragedy of the floods in no way lessens the relevance of Water Week. In fact, it highlights its significance and amplifies the lessons we need to learn about water. Water Week is about the relevance 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" points to South Africa's weather extremes and the cycle of drought and flood through the centuries. Sometimes we have far too little rain. Sometimes 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.

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

South Africa is a water scarce country

We are a water scarce country. We have an average of less than 600mm of rainfall a year, making us one of the driest countries in the world. Our average per capita water is under 1700 cubic metres, which classifies us as a water-stressed country.

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.

We 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 are also faced with limited options. Already we use over half of our available water resources. 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 (26%) could be made available, mainly by constructing more large dams. However, the remaining 33 per cent is lost to evaporation and flood spillage. And it is, unfortunately, simply not economically viable to try to capture these unpredictable flood water losses.

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.

Everything works with water

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 and to fulfil the potential of a better life for all our people. Despite scarce water resources, we can still say that "everything works with water".

All jobs, be they in industry, in commerce, in agriculture or in tourism is in some way dependent on water. The generation of electricity, so essential to a modern economy, is reliant on water. "Everything works with water" – Domestic and urban water use about 11 % of the total. Mining and large industries use about 8 %. Afforestation uses about 8 % and irrigation uses about 54 % of water. Current water use for environmental purposes is estimated at around 19 % of national water use.

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.

All this – a growing economy, a needy and increasing population, expanded access to water supplies and our increasing environmental obligations – presupposes a need for 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.

Why we need to work for water

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 to optimise their flow.

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 and, by changing the way they engage with the environment, they can 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."

Water Week 2000

The purpose of Water Week 2000 is to highlight the various problems and needs we face in respect of water in South Africa, bringing 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, we will take part in a call to action at Bridgetown in Athlone. The President will address the gathering and he and the Cabinet will join the local school children cleaning up the Vygeskraal River.

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 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.

As you can see, I expect to be getting quite a lot of exercise in March! But I hope that our mainly symbolic activities will result in many more activities of their kind across the country. A programme of regional events has been planned in all provinces – led by the Premiers and local community leadership. These will involve activities such as clearing up riverbanks, repairing leaks and faulty plumbing, as well as celebrations of various kinds. In the Northern Province and Mpumalanga, the focus will be on repairing the damage in wake of the floods.

There will also be competitions such as the essay and drawing competition for children sponsored by Pick ‘n Pay and a photo competition sponsored by Foto First and the Trans-Caledon Tunnel Authority and other ways for people to participate in Water Week 2000. World Water Week in the Netherlands will focus on world water security in the 21st Century. I will be leading a Department Delegation at this all-important event.

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

Our Patrons have also responded warmly to the campaign. They include Former President Nelson Mandela, His Majesty, King Goodwill Zwelathini, Her Majesty, The Rain Queen, Modjadji, His Grace, Archbishop Njongunkulu Ndungane and Nobel Prize Winner Ms Nadine Gordimer. I would like to welcome His Majesty, King Goodwill Zwelathini and Nadine Gordimer who are here with us today.

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.

The role of media

I have invited you to this special media launch today because I believe that your interest and involvement is essential. We ask you to support us by giving us the coverage we need to reach South Africa with this important campaign.

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 make a call to 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.

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 now like to toast you with a glass of fresh water, to celebrate the start of this important campaign.

"Viva water, pure and clean".