

**SPEECH BY MR RONNIE KASRILS, MP, MINISTER OF WATER
AFFAIRS AND FORESTRY, AT THE WORKING FOR WATER
RESEARCH SYMPOSIUM ON TUESDAY, 19 AUGUST 2003 AT
KIRSTENBOSCH, CAPE TOWN**

Chairperson, honoured delegates and members of the press.

May I begin by welcoming you, and thanking you all for attending this inaugural Research Symposium of the Working for Water Programme. As you all may already know, the Programme was launched in 1995, as a poverty alleviation initiative focused on controlling the spread of invasive alien plants. The Department of Water Affairs and Forestry, together with the Departments of Agriculture and of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, and in partnership with other departments, are responsible for ensuring our government's responsibility in dealing with the range of significant environmental and social problems associated with the spread of invasive alien plants that affect the wellbeing of all South Africans.

As the name implies, the Working for Water Programme helps to reverse what will otherwise be a devastating trend in terms of water security – not only the obvious aspect of water supply, but

water quality issues and associated problems such as turbidity, thermal problems, erosion, siltation of dams and flooding.

Invasive alien plants also have a severe impact in terms of other concerns, including biological diversity and the ecological integrity of natural systems, fire management, the productive use of land, and ultimately the conservation of our life-support systems.

To date over one million hectares have been cleared whilst over 15 million person days of employment has been created. A variety of other benefits and also challenges associated with this will be highlighted in the presentations over the next couple of days.

What is obvious is that in order to do something, you have to know what you are doing. You have to both be able to measure what you are achieving, and measure the efficacy with which it is being achieved. To these ends, research is essential. We need to know the extent of the problem. We need to know the consequences of our actions. We need to know what are the best management practices. We need to bring all this together in an interrogation of our efforts so as to put our funding to its best possible use.

The aspect of biological control agents is an area of research of particular importance. It is becoming clear that there are very high returns on investment possible through a careful and structured approach to biological control. But like all other aspects of our

work, it needs to be interrogated, both through research and on-going monitoring and evaluation.

It is pleasing that an important collaborative research partnership between Working for Water and the Agricultural Research Council's Plant Protection Research Institute to conduct research into the identification and screening of biological agents, is about to be signed. This bodes well for the sustainable control of invasive alien plants.

I must confess to a particular interest in the possibility that a biological control agent might be found for the beautiful jacaranda trees that grace the streets of some of our cities and towns in the north of the country. I am concerned about the risk of alienating our public through approaches that may be seen to be riding rough-shot over their concerns, and this is one example where research could alleviate a potential conflict that could harm broader efforts.

There has been a very strong emphasis placed on co-operative government by the Office of President Thabo Mbeki and Deputy President Jacob Zuma. It is clear that the only way in which initiatives will work is through an integrated approach between departments; between the various tiers of Government; between the public and private sectors, and the labour movement, and between all of these groups and civil society. The challenge that has been put out by the Presidency is to make partnerships work.

Much of the success of the Working for Water Programme is due to its commitment to partnerships – and to the reciprocal commitment from its partners. The manner in which the Department of Agriculture has reached out to the Programme in the development of the regulations around the Conservation of Agricultural Resources Act, for example, is indicative of this shared commitment to partnerships.

The utilisation of best available and applicable knowledge is crucial if the Working for Water Programme is to be successful. This symposium represents a landmark in bringing together our researchers and managers from a range of backgrounds to listen to contributions addressing the wide-ranging activities associated with the management of invasive alien plants. The multi-faceted nature of the Programme also creates an avenue for specialists from a variety of disciplines to interact, and your presence here bears testimony to the commitment and capacity we have at our disposal to deal with the scourge of invasives effectively.

As leaders and policy makers, what we implement is only as good as the knowledge base by which it is informed, and at this symposium I want to challenge all delegates to build on our ability to transform best available knowledge into policy that can enforce the development imperatives which our country is facing.

I would like to thank all people who have helped us to achieve success in the Programme. As with any programme of this size, problems do arise. But the commitment that is so evident in the Programme, both to the control of invading alien plants and to optimise its contribution to poverty relief and development in our country, should ensure that the programme continues to improve.

I wish you all a stimulating and successful symposium.